

Kim Moody on AOC's Journey to the Center ♦ What's Next for UAW?

#228 • JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2024 • \$5

A SOCIALIST JOURNAL

# AGAINST THE CURRENT



NEVER AGAIN FOR ANYONE

## The Israeli-U.S. Inferno in Palestine

♦ DAVID FINKEL, ALAN WALD, PURNIMA BOSE

## Return to Jim Crow: Voter Suppression

♦ MALIK MIAH

## Rustin: the Movie and the Organizer

♦ JOEL GEIER



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# A Letter from the Editors

## Election 2024 Deform & Dysfunction

IN A POLARIZED, angry, anxiety-and-crisis-ridden United States of America, wide swathes of a fragmented and divided electorate find common ground at least on what they *don't* want: a 2024 repeat of a presidential election between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. Yet eleven months in advance — subject to change, but not easily — that spectacle is just what we'll get.

Such a prospect, along with Trump's criminal trials and Biden's policy stumbles, may help explain a peculiar popular climate of simultaneous political agitation and apathy. Many millions of voters including working-class people (aside from Trump cult loyalists) will find themselves voting for presidential candidates and political parties they despise the least, not for choices they actually like.

This malaise, rather than any hopeful excitement, also accounts for why the anti-vax and racist certified crackpot candidate Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. is polling as high as 24% as an independent, or why the rightwing Democratic Senator Joe Manchin might undertake a "No Labels" third-party campaign to "mobilize the middle" that could throw the election any which way.

No one should underestimate what a revived Trump presidency might mean — with his operatives' overt, already promised concentration/deportation camps to be constructed for asylum seekers, forced removals of students for pro-Palestinian activism, targeted attacks on the press, mass firings of government employees to be replaced by regime loyalists, wholesale pardons for the January 6 aspiring insurrectionists, and who-knows-what chaos in imperialist global management.

The campaign of Trump's emerging leading Republican rival Nikki Haley has been endorsed (purchased) by the Koch Brothers' "Americans for Prosperity" (Plutocracy) outlet. This represents an attempt to consolidate a grossly reactionary, but more establishment neoconservative alternative to the runaway criminality of Trump and his prospective second term. That option would surely have appeal to much of the U.S. capitalist ruling class. (One rightwing commentator, Nolan Finley in the *Detroit News*, urges that Haley become the "No Labels" candidate.)

### Activism and Ironies

To avoid a one-sided overly bleak portrayal, we should cite positive cases of social action that have made a difference. First, as we've discussed frequently, is the labor activist revival, culminating in union contracts with big gains for auto workers, at UPS, and steps forward in organizing places like Tesla and Amazon.

Second, at the present critical moment, is the outpouring in the streets demanding a ceasefire in Israel's war against Gaza and Palestine, which we discussed in our previous issue (ATC 227, "Catastrophe in Palestine and Israel: Apartheid on the Road to Genocide") and continue our coverage in the present issue.

Third is the continuing popular revulsion against the cynical and deeply evil anti-abortion extremism of the right wing, which is prepared to sacrifice women's lives to the "pro-life" cause, along with book bans and state-level voter suppression measures.

Such examples show that class and social movements continue — as also shown by myriad state, local and community struggles, including around abortion, trans and housing justice among other issues. The fact that these are not generating much positive energy at the level of national electoral politics is one indication of a deformed and dysfunctional political system.

In this space we will not attempt to prognosticate, or chew over polling data, or (for the moment) seriously approach the prospects of an independent progressive alternative. The latter, critically important possibility must be a topic for future in-depth discussion. Here we want to explore some of the multiple ironies at the beginning of the electoral season.

If there's one policy arena where Biden-Harris administration should get at least passing marks and maybe some plaudits, it would be the general health of the post-pandemic economy. Yet that is exactly where polls show "greater confidence in the Republicans" — whose policies have been the most blatantly to enrich-the-rich, impoverish-the-poor, and run-up-deficits while pretending to be fiscally responsible.

It's an astonishing public-relations triumph of plutocracy posing as populism. Democratic pundits and operatives are visibly distressed that "Bidenomics" fails to garner the approval it deserves. The reasons for this apparent anomaly go far beyond its mediocre "messaging."

It's true that this administration came in with a Build Back Better program that had some inspiring, even transformative potential (even if much of it came cloaked in nationalist rhetoric about countering the rise of China). As it emerged from the desk of Bernie Sanders and the ambitions of Green New Dealers, the program included some serious federal spending — on infrastructure and energy transition — amounting to something like half the annual military budget.

Thanks to Senator Manchin among others, the best part of the program was trimmed back to what became the Inflation Reduction Act. For example, pandemic-relief subsidies that cut U.S. childhood poverty in half — a very significant accomplishment in this brutally unequal society! ran out. Thus in Manchin's own state — according to official Census Bureau's estimates, West Virginia's child poverty rate — the highest in the nation — increased from 20.7% to 25.0% between 2021 and 2022.

Most important, the measurable benefits of the recovery flow overwhelmingly to the high-income layers of the population, who need them the least. Folks at lower-middle income or less levels see very little if any difference in their daily lives.

Inflation levels are well down from their brief eight-percent high point, but that still leaves prices of basic necessities far higher than they were — while the Federal Reserve's interest-rate hikes that were ostensibly needed to "curb inflation" have themselves exacerbated a housing crisis that especially afflicts young people (and many limited-income senior citizens too).

The cumulative result is that macroeconomic statistics for the moment look reasonably good, but for many tens  
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January / February 2024 — Volume XXXVIII, Number 6

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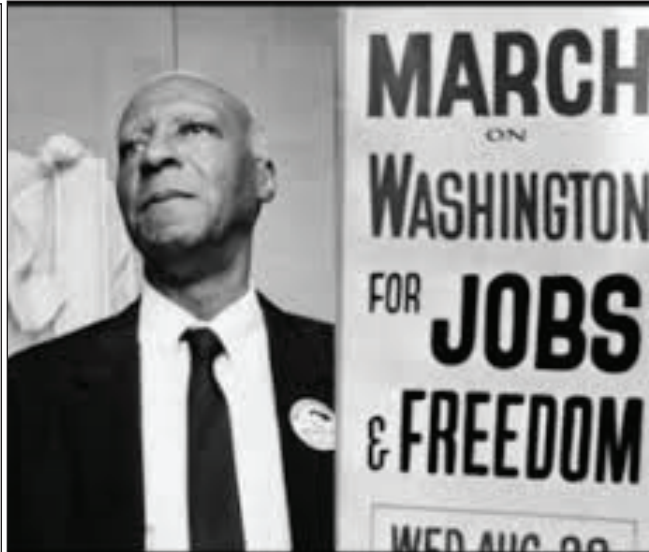
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Cover: Jewish Voice for Peace memorial of Kristallnacht, the 1938 German pogrom.

Above: (Left) Poster for the Ed Sadlowski slate running in the USWA election in 1972. (Right) A. Philip Randolph, organizer of the 1963 March on Washington and labor leader.

Back Cover: UAW strike picket with President Shawn Fain, surrounded by the press.

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AGAINST THE CURRENT is published in order to promote dialogue among the activists, organizers and serious scholars of the left. We promote the vision of socialism from below, of a revolutionary, working-class, multinational and multiracial, feminist and antibureaucratic socialist movement. ATC is sponsored by Solidarity, a socialist organization founded in 1986, together with a group of advisory editors who believe that this magazine can contribute to building an effective U.S. socialist left.

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## U.S. Supreme Court Rules Vs. Voting Rights: Door Opens to Return of Jim Crow

By Malik Miah

A FEDERAL COURT on November 20 issued a decision severely curtailing enforcement of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) that could affect voters of color nationwide and will probably be appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The decision opens the door wider to a return to Jim Crow laws that once ruled the South. The laws made it nearly impossible for African American people to vote or function as equal citizens.

The Voting Rights Act prohibits voting practices or procedures that discriminate on the basis of race or color. It did not specify who could file suits against the violators.

The appellate court ruled, for the first time, that a key section of the VRA, adopted by Congress in 1965, can *only* be enforced by the U.S. attorney general. The decision upheld a ruling by U.S. District Judge Lee Rudofsky, who in 2022 dismissed a lawsuit challenging Arkansas' new district map because he said that the Justice Department had to join the plaintiffs.

Voting rights groups in Arkansas argued in their lawsuit that a new map of congressional districts weakened Black voters' electoral power in the state.

Rudofsky, an appointee of President Donald Trump, gave Attorney General Merrick Garland, appointed by President Biden, five days to join the groups in the case. When Garland refused, the case was dismissed.

### Individuals and Groups Denied

The appellate court, the Eighth Circuit Court, affirmed the district court ruling. It also said only the U.S. government can sue to enforce the Voting Rights Act that allowed Black people to vote across the country with few restrictions. For the first two hundred years of the country that was not the case.

The new ruling would dismantle the primary mechanism that voting rights groups use to protect against racial discrimination in voting, often in the form of lawsuits challenging electoral maps.

In their decision, the Eighth Circuit judges noted that, in the past 40 years, at least 182 successful Section 2 of the VRA cases have been filed and, of those, only 15 "were

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August 6, 1965: President Lyndon Johnson signs Voting Rights Act as MLK and others look on.

brought solely" by the attorney general.

In the majority opinion, Judge David Stras — a Trump appointee — wrote that while courts have, "for much of the last half-century;" "assumed" that Section 2 is enforceable, "a deeper look has revealed that this assumption rests on flimsy footing." Stras was joined in the majority opinion by Judge Raymond Gruender, a George W. Bush appointee.

In his dissent, Chief Judge Lavenski Smith — also a Bush appointee — said that, while "admittedly, the Court has never directly addressed the existence of a private right of action under [Section 2]," the court has "repeatedly considered such cases, held that private rights of action exist under other sections of the VRA, and concluded in other VRA cases that a private right of action exists."

"Until the Court rules or Congress amends the statute, I would follow existing precedent that permits citizens to seek a judicial remedy," Smith wrote. "Rights so foundational to self-government and citizenship should not depend solely on the discretion or availability of the government's agents for

protection."

"Eliminating individual people's right to sue" under the VRA "runs contrary to settled law, common sense and any basic concept of fairness: When the government discriminates against people, they should have a right to fight back in court," said Paul Smith, senior vice president at the Campaign Legal Center.

Richard L. Hasen, a professor of law and political science at the University of California, wrote that the 8th Circuit majority reached its decision "with a wooden, textualist analysis" despite "recognizing that the Supreme Court and lower courts have for decades allowed such cases to be brought, assuming that Congress intended to allow such suits."

Wendy Weiser, who directs the Democracy Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law, said that this is why it is "very significant" that the 8th District would use such logic to decide "something so significant and so radical" that she argued would be "devastating to the enforcement of the Voting Rights Act."

Weiser said the 8th Circuit's decision sug-

gests that, nationally, there's "an environment where judges feel like it would be permissible for them to just rewrite the law, upend precedent, and core rights and protections.

The intent of the civil rights law, which outlaws racial discrimination as it relates to voting, has typically been enforced by lawsuits from these groups, not by the government.

### VRA Basically Gutted

The Supreme Court has over the last decade generally sought to weaken voting rights for African Americans falsely claiming race is not or should be a consideration in court rulings.

Section 2 and Section 4 were the heart of the law. Section 4 had mandated that the Justice Department be contacted before certain states could re-map voting districts or re-write laws. The law also said Section 5 on "preclearance" must be followed by those states. Section 4 and 5 prevented new voting maps from being drawn without preapproval.

Section 4 was overturned by the Supreme Court in 2013 thus invalidating preclearance. The vote was a 5-4 majority. Justice John Roberts, a long time opponent of equal rights. Immediately after that decision states across the South passed new anti-voting laws that restricted Black voting rights.

The 2013 decision only applied to Section 4, which was seen as the backbone of the VRA. It did not overturn Section 2 that allowed civil rights groups and individuals to sue states for voting discrimination. Since 2013 Section 2 allowing individuals and groups to file suits has been the only barrier for civil and voting rights groups to fight state discriminating decisions.

### What Happens Next?

Since 2013 the Supreme Court has heard cases filed by civil rights groups and individuals. In June, for example, the Court, in a 5-4 decision, ruled against an Alabama congressional map that included just one district with a majority of Black voters, requiring the drawing of a new map in that state.

Abha Khanna — who argued the case before the Supreme Court — said she was thrilled with the ruling because it ensures that districts in Black communities are drawn as they were intended under the VRA.

In November, the conservative U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruled the opposite way of the Eighth Circuit, affirming the right of individuals to bring such actions.

If the Supreme Court upholds the Eighth Circuit decision, that would potentially completely "gut" nationwide limited protections

of voting rights and essentially limit cases to "what the Department of Justice can and chooses to take on," Khanna said. "It's doing so in part under an environment where it has been encouraged to do so by, I think, this more radical turn in the U.S. Supreme Court." Few civil and voting rights advocates expect the Court to protect voting rights. Only last year it said using race in college admissions was unconstitutional, declaring the Constitution "color blind."

The role of the Supreme Court for most of its history has been to limit equal rights for Black people and other people of color. The exception was during the mass civil rights movement in the 1960s when historic civil rights and voting rights legislation was adopted and upheld by the court.

After the second American Revolution, the Civil War of 1861-65, freed slaves won the right to vote and became close to equal citizens. But in 1877 Congress decided to remove Union troops protecting former slaves from violent white supremacists.

Within 10 years, Jim Crow segregation laws were enacted across former slave states and Black people lost most of their civil rights written in the amendments to the Constitution. It took nearly 100 years to win them back, only to see them under assault again. ■

## From Landmark Law to Dead Letter by Malik Miah

**1865** — Adoption of 13th Amendment that abolished slavery,

**1866** — Civil Rights Act gives citizenship to all born in the United States, although excluding the Indigenous population.

**1868** — Ratification of 14th Amendment granted citizenship to all persons "born or naturalized in the United States," including former slaves.

**1869** — Passage of the 15th amendment to the Constitution, guaranteeing voting rights to African American males

**1896-1960s** — In 1896 Louisiana passed the "grandfather clause" as a way of de-registering African Americans through outrageous literacy tests and poll taxes, while exempting whites whose grandfathers voted. Black Louisianans, who were 44.8% of the voters in 1896, by 1900 were four percent. Shortly afterward Alabama, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Virginia passed similar laws.

**1957** — Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. The new act established the Civil Rights Section of the Justice Department and empowered federal prosecutors to obtain court injunctions against interference with the right to vote. Southern Dixiecrats made sure the new law did not change the power of the states over voting rights. Civil rights leaders had pushed for a law with teeth on the issue.

**1964** — Passage of the 24th amendment, lowering the voting age to 18 and outlawed

poll taxes in national elections.

**1965** — U.S. Senate passes the Voting Rights Act by 77-19, the House votes by 335-85, and President Johnson signs the Voting Rights Act into law on August 9th, in the presence of civil rights leaders including MLK. The Voting Rights Act enforced the 15th Amendment, sweeping away state restrictions on voting rights that flourished with the end of Reconstruction (1877).

Of the various sections of the act, Sections 2-5 are the best known. Section 2 prohibited states or political subdivisions from setting prerequisites to the right of citizens to vote on account of race or color.

Section 3 outlines various ways that the U.S. Attorney General, if choosing to intervene to implement voting rights, could precede. This included appointing federal examiners to register voters and suspending tests or practices that impede the right.

Section 4 defines those states with a history of racial discrimination. Section 5 requires those jurisdictions covered to obtain "pre-clearance" from either the District Court for the District of Columbia or the U.S. Attorney General for any new voting practices and procedures.

By the end of the year, 250,000 African American voters had been registered, one third by federal examiners.

**1966-69** — The VRA was challenged, but the U.S. Supreme Court reaffirmed the broad range of voting practices for which

preclearance was required. This included the Supreme Court's 1969 decision, *Harper v. Virginia State Board of Elections*, which held that Virginia's poll tax unconstitutional under the 14th amendment. Also, in 1966 the Court ruled, in *South Carolina v. Katzenbach*, that the Attorney General had the right to appoint federal examiners.

Perhaps most relevant to the recent decision, the Court's 1969 decision, *Allen v. State Board of Elections*, held that individuals have the right to legally challenge discriminatory practices under Section 5 of the VRA.

**1970, 1975** — Presidents Nixon and Ford each extend the VRA for five years.

**1982** — President Reagan extends the VRA for 25 years.

**2006** — Congress extends Section 5 of the VRA 25 years. Since 2006, Congress extended the key sections of the Voting Rights Act four times in overwhelming, bipartisan votes.

**2013** — In *Shelby v. Holder*, the Supreme Court gutted the requirement that nine states with a history of voting discrimination must seek pre-approval for voting changes, declaring this an outdated rule, as well as unconstitutional.

The same day, Texas officials announced that they would implement the nation's most restrictive voter ID law, which had been blocked in the preclearance process. This law was the first of a wave of policies, passed by states previously subject to pre-clearance. ■

# TDU's Rank-and-File Convention By Michael Friedman



At TDU's 2023 convention, UAW President Shawn Fain emphasized the importance of TDU as a model for UAW reformers.

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ON NOVEMBER 3-5, the Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) held its 48th annual Rank-and-File Convention. Having just written that, it overwhelms me a bit that this organization has been around for almost 50 years.

As someone who has gone to all but one of these gatherings, the 2023 convention made me reflect on the stability, growth and success of this movement to create an effective rank-and-file caucus within one of the largest labor unions in the United States.

I think back on the first TDU convention at Kent State University in 1976, attended by a modest cadre of rank and filers, picketed by a phalanx of union goons led by then International Brotherhood of Teamsters President Jackie Presser.

We were tasked with deciding whether to create a more permanent rank-and-file caucus from the modest group of Teamster activists who had spent the previous months building a campaign for a decent national Master Freight contract. Looking back I can only respond, "We've come a long way, baby!"

This year's convention in Chicago had over 500 folks in attendance, a good number of whom were coming for the first time. Clearly the activism that had been built up for

the UPS contract campaign — with its early mobilizations, practice pickets, and parking lot rallies months before the July 31 expiration date — carried into this convention.

That activism resulted in a contract that addressed and resolved a range of issues that had been frustrating and motivating UPS activists for years — yet without having to actually strike. The communications and organization of the IBT national leadership during the negotiation process, and the work of TDU and other activists at the local level, let UPS management know that the union was not bluffing and was ready to do what was necessary to secure a contract that met their needs.

The energy of the contract campaign was still evident at the convention, especially in the lineup of the main speakers. Friday's keynote speaker was Sean O'Brien, General President of the IBT.

His comments addressed the UPS struggle and its overwhelming success, and importantly he noted that having come from the union's old guard, he had been somewhat skeptical of TDU. In the course of the UPS contract campaign, he had come to see them as a welcome partner in re-building the union's strength, and he saw that partnership continuing as he spoke of the challenges ahead — winning strong contracts, enforcing them going forward and organizing the

unorganized.

O'Brien spoke of the plans for building a campaign to unionize Amazon workers as the biggest organizing initiative and noted that the Teamsters had established an Amazon task force that is already working on this campaign.

## Successes and Moving Forward

Saturday's keynote speaker was Sean Fain, President of the United Auto Workers (UAW), who had just completed successful contract negotiations with the Big Three automakers, using innovative strike strategies to win record breaking gains. Fain spoke about the rank-and-file caucus in the UAW, Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD), formed in 2019.

UAWD had taken advantage of the corruption charges against a number of the union's Administration Caucus leaders to push for direct election of international officers, rather than have them be voted on by selected convention delegates.

TDU had also been able to establish itself and grow by winning the right to elect International officers in the Teamsters when the government sued the corrupt old guard leadership. It was very impressive what UAWD had been able to accomplish in just about four years — including things that it had taken TDU about 45 years to accomplish — but

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pathbreakers often have a much tougher road to hoe than those that follow.

Indeed, Fain expressly recognized that and cited TDU as the template for the success he and the UAWD were able to achieve in the UAW. But Fain, like O'Brien, did not simply focus on the recent contract successes of their respective unions had, but also on using that success as a springboard for further organizing.

Specifically, he pointed to the increased wages being offered by non-union automakers Toyota and Honda (Kia climbed aboard that bandwagon after the convention ended), and called that a "UAW bump."

More generally, Fain spoke of the struggles beyond the auto sector, seeing the current rise in union activity as presaging an extended fight between what he characterized as the "working class against the billionaire class." That message was well-received by those in attendance.

To highlight the struggles being undertaken by other unions, Lindsey Dougherty, the Western Region IBT Vice-President who also serves as Director of the Motion Picture Division, talked about how the IBT had been a force for solidarity in both the writers' and actors' strikes by honoring picket lines and building cross-union power. Those strikes

were both successfully resolved after the convention had closed.

### Activist Workshops

While the speakers were an inspirational focus for this convention, the real work of the gathering was on the extensive workshops available to attendees. Six workshops focused on how to keep developing activism and leadership skills among UPS members, i.e. winning grievances, enforcing the contract, and building power at the base.

As TDU has become more successful, there were also workshops on running for union office, and leadership skills for those who have successfully become local officers. Other workshops included organizing Amazon, general contract enforcement tools, drafting contracts, fighting warehouse production standards, and winning grievances.

The convention also set out, in broad outlines, the strategy for TDU going forward. Having won significant gains in a number of contracts this bargaining round, the key focus must be on contract enforcement. A lot of the above-noted workshops stressed the organizing skills necessary to make the rank and file a key force in this effort.

Next, as has been a continuing focus for TDU, is a renewed emphasis on increasing

the number of TDU members elected to union office. Finally, TDU is committed to becoming an essential element in the Teamster organizing drives, obviously the Amazon campaign but also other opportunities both locally and nationally.

To end this overview of the TDU convention by simply praising its size, scope and success seems appropriate, but a bit trite. I will share one thought that struck me over and over again as I listened to the speakers at the various sessions.

Given the fragility of the current political outlook and the upcoming 2024 elections, a rising and powerful union movement can speak to the needs and concerns of working class folks far better than the bloviated grievance-tending of rightwing populism. That cult may speak to valid resentments, but offers no meaningful practical benefits or improvements in the daily struggles of working people.

The union movement can provide those benefits and improvements, and give people the dignity and respect they seek by empowering them to fight and win those things for themselves. Let's hope the spirit and energy of TDU's convention will translate into the successes and victories that are needed to have that kind of impact. ■

## Labor Calls for Ceasefire Now!

AT A NOVEMBER 29 news conference held in front of the White House, as hunger strikers called for permanent ceasefire in Gaza, UAW Region 9A Director Brandon Mancilla announced that the UAW had endorsed the ceasefire. The million-strong union joined with the American Postal Workers Union, California Nurses Association, Chicago Teachers Union and the UE, shortly before Israel resumed its military operation in Gaza. Mancilla spoke about the UAW leadership's decision as in the tradition of earlier UAW positions of global solidarity: "We opposed fascism in World War II, we opposed the Vietnam war, we opposed apartheid South Africa, and we mobilized union resources in that fight."

In addition to support to an immediate and permanent ceasefire, he announced that the union's leadership body would set up a working group "to study the history of Israel and Palestine and the UAW's economic ties to the conflict and explore how we can have a just transition for workers from war to peace." In a Facebook post, UAW President Shawn Fain indicated his support. Subsequently Fain joined Mancilla to speak at a Washington, DC press conference and rally.

Unions are becoming more willing to take on seemingly controversial social justice issues and examine their past practices. Although the UAW has taken generally progressive positions, previous UAW International Executive Boards have uncritically supported the state of Israel even when members demanded change. In two important campaigns by UAW members, the IEB used its power to oppose those demands.

- By 1973, many Lebanese, Palestinian and Yemeni workers had been hired into the Big Three plants. At the time of the October 1973 war, they discovered that UAW Local 600 had recently purchased \$300,000 of Israeli bonds with members' dues money. Using their community-based organizations, they pulled together a 3,000-person demonstration at the UAW Local 600 office, demanding that the local rescind its decision. Shortly afterward, about 70 Arab workers from nearly every auto factory in the area founded the Arab Workers Caucus. They raised money for war relief and demanded an end to the million-dollar investment in pension funds that UAW leadership held in Israeli bonds. Discovering that the following month UAW President Leonard Woodcock would receive a humanitarian award from the Zionist B'nai B'rith International, they called for wildcat strikes in the plants and mobilized 1,000 picketers to confront Woodcock at the \$100 a plate dinner. While Woodcock ducked in by a back door, they chanted "Dispose of the Bonds" and "Jewish People Yes, Zionism No."

Of the 2000 Arab workers who skipped work that day at Dodge Main, at least a quarter were fired. Well-known progressive UAW secretary treasurer Emil Mazey claimed that the Israel Bonds investment was solid and called the demonstrators "communists." At the 1974 UAW Convention the caucus attempted to pass a resolution for divestment and protection against discriminatory practices by the union and companies, but the resolution went nowhere. Eventually the caucus disbanded. Few Arab workers work in Detroit area plants these days.

- In 2014 UAW Local 2865, representing graduate students in the California university system, passed a motion in support of Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS); the following year the UAW IEB ruled against the resolution.

The new reform leadership, who represent the majority on the IEB, are interested in revisiting many of the previous UAW positions. This represents a new day. (See Jeff Schuhrke's "When Arab-American Detroit Auto Workers Struck for Palestinian Liberation," in *Jacobin*, 8/3/20, for more details and links, <https://jacobin.com/2020/08/palestine-strike-wildcat-uaw>.)

Just the week before Christmas the executive council of 1199SEIU, representing more than 450,000 health care workers, added their voices to the ceasefire demand. ■

## After the Auto Strikes: UAW Faces the Tasks Ahead

By Dianne Feeley

AS THE United Auto Workers' tentative agreements were announced at the end of October, UAW President Shawn Fain explained that not all 10 central demands of the Stand-Up Strike were fully met. To do so it would be necessary to gain our "full strength."

By the time of the next contract expiration on May 1, 2028, he anticipates, negotiations would not only take place with the Big Three but with the "Big Five, Big Seven or Big Ten." Fain also had encouraged other unions to set their contract expiration date to coincide that International Workers' Day and be in a position to strike together.

This perspective contrasted with the worry some workers expressed. If the demands were not fully implemented now, by 2028 there might be a recession and the UAW would be in a weaker bargaining position.

Over the course of the contract negotiations, the UAW had been able to win elements of almost every demand. This included restoration of the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) suspended more than a decade earlier and one that analysts and auto workers — including this writer! — had thought might prove impossible.

Other breakthroughs included the right to strike over plant closures, two-weeks pay for parental leave, and opening the door to winning union recognition at the joint-venture battery facilities. Importantly, Stellantis agreed to reopen the Belvidere plant and add a battery facility on the site. Negotiators were unable, however, to break through the legal wall that corporations had erected against post-retirement health care and pensions.

Part of what gave Fain confidence to project growing strength were emails flooding in from workers in non-union plants. Non-union employers also felt the impact of the UAW contract victory with Toyota immediately increasing wages 9% and decreasing the time for workers to reach top pay. Honda announced an 11% wage increase, with Hyundai promised a 25% wage hike by 2028.

Terming these moves "the UAW bump," Fain asserted that corporate attempts to match UAW-won wage increases were a smart move, but not enough to stop workers

determined to win their rights. After all, being part of a militant union isn't just having higher wages and good benefits but altering the power dynamic.

Through the contract campaign and strike strategy, the UAW halted concessions and wage tiers, reined in the abuse of temporary workers and even forced the companies — which had attempted to outwit the union by setting up battery facilities as joint ventures — to unlock those doors.

More than a decade ago the Detroit Three shut down post-retirement benefits to wipe future "liabilities" off their books. Although unwilling to buck Wall Street's concerns, the companies agreed with this contract to put 10% of a worker's 40-hour weekly wage into their 401k even *without any matching contribution*. They even agreed to pay strikers \$105 a day for every day they were out. And they were willing to include even temporary workers in the \$5,000 signing and profit-sharing bonuses.

But to win post-retirement benefits, the UAW will have to be bigger, stronger and bolder. As Fain pointed out, it had taken a much larger UAW over 100 days to win pensions back in 1950.

### Organizing a Reshaped Work Force

Within two weeks of the Detroit Three contracts being ratified, the UAW International Executive Board (IEB) launched a multi-pronged campaign with a short video encouraging workers in non-union companies to sign up with the UAW. As in the recent contract campaign, the video discusses corporate profitability over the past decade. It ends with President Fain's message:

*"The money is there, the time is right and the answer is simple. You don't have to live paycheck to paycheck, you don't have to worry about how you're gonna pay your rent or feed your family while the company makes billions. A better life is out there and it starts with you: UAW."*

A subsequent flyer outlines how the organizing process can advance across multiple companies. Unlike the previous unsuccessful attempts at Nissan (1989, 2001, 2017) and Volkswagen (2014, 2019), these depend on in-plant organizing committees. That is, intensive one-on-one organizing will be based on workers' self-organization.

This follows the model that the recently elected reformers to the IEB used to encourage members in preparation for the Stand-Up Strike. As with the strike, this in-plant organizing does not concentrate on one company. Instead, it encourages workers at their plants to seize the current momentum.

Organizing committees seem to be developing in at least three assembly plants. the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee where 1,000 workers, representing 30% of the workforce, signed union authorization cards within a week, the Toyota plant in Georgetown, Kentucky with a workforce of 7,800 and the Rivian electric vehicle plant of 5,000 in Bloomington, Illinois.

Luis Feliz Leon reported in "Auto Workers Direct Momentum Toward Organizing Plants Across the U.S." (*Labor Notes* website) that the already formed organizing committee at Rivian surveyed 1,000 co-workers and developed petitions demanding longer break time. At a December Facebook Live meeting, Fain described how workers are asserting their right to distribute UAW literature. He announced that the UAW is backing them up by filing harassment charges with the National Labor Relations Board against three companies.

Although the UAW has long been seen as setting the pace for workers' wages and benefits, the reality is that UAW auto workers are only 140,000 strong — just a portion of roughly 645,000 U.S. workers manufacturing and assembling today's vehicles.

Currently the so-called Big Three produce only 40% of the country's cars; the other 60% are produced by 150,000 non-union workers at BMW, Honda, Hyundai, Lucid, Nissan, Mazda, Mercedes-Benz, Rivian, Subaru, Tesla, Toyota, Volkswagen and Volvo.

Over the past decade these corporations raked in almost a trillion dollars in profits, with at least 40% earned in the United States. Many of their plants are situated in "right-to-work" states.

However, the majority of auto workers manufacture parts rather than assemble finished vehicles. The more than 5,000 auto parts manufacturers, employing over 350,000 mostly non-unionized workers, feed the assembly plants. To minimize transportation costs, facilities are often located near assembly plants.

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*Dianne Feeley is a retired auto worker and member of Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD). She is an editor of ATC.*



The Detroit Three used to produce their own core parts, but the majority were sold off 25-30 years ago to what are now called tier-one suppliers. Those few parts plants remaining within the three companies, although covered under the Master Contract, had been designated lower-tier facilities. Workers hired after 2007 — in GM's "subsystems," Ford's two axle plants, or at Stellantis' distribution centers (Mopar) — were unable to reach the top wage that assembly workers made and ineligible for post-retirement benefits.

In the just-ratified agreement that wage gap has been abolished. But other parts plants, even in those represented by the UAW or another union, are more likely to pay lower wages and offer fewer benefits.

Parts plants vary in size, with some having less than 100 workers while the largest have more than 500. While non-union assembly plants generally match the wages of the Detroit Three plants, parts plants typically pay less even though the work is usually more dangerous.

### Charting a New Path

In its 2023 contract campaign the new UAW leadership emphasized the fight between the working class, whose labor produces wealth, and an arrogant corporate elite that expropriates it. This militant approach called upon every UAW member to play an active role.

At the height of the strike one-third of the membership was picketing their plant. Meanwhile the two-thirds still at work were encouraged to refuse voluntary overtime, monitor management, talk with co-workers and be prepared to join the picket lines at a moment's notice.

A weekly video update kept everyone informed on the state of the negotiations and outlined what was necessary to exert additional pressure. This was in sharp contrast to how previous negotiations were carried out.

While the Stand-Up Strike may not be a model every time a contract is negotiated or a plant organized, several elements are certainly applicable. *Most important is the centrality of the membership.*

The contract demands came from the membership; the contract campaign and strike were driven by worker participation. The weekly updates gave workers a window



For UAW workers, eliminating tiers was a priority demand.

<https://jimwestphoto.com>

into the progress of the negotiations and once a tentative agreement was reached, the negotiating committee reported to the membership who then read and discussed the contract before voting.

Given that the reformers only recently took office, they did not have the infrastructure in place to consider a work-to-rule campaign instead of a strike. This had proved to be a successful strategy back in the 1980s when employed by Jerry Tucker and the New Directions movement in UAW's Region 5.

First used in the United States at the General Motors Ternstedt parts plant on Detroit's west side in 1937, work-to-rule is most successful when a significant majority of workers go through the motions of working but machines develop problems, materials are mislaid or delivered to the wrong department. The coordinated chaos quickly convinces management to settle.

The version developed with the Stand-Up Strike was to have a minority of plants across the three corporations on strike while the majority at work were encouraged to do their job "by the book" and take no shortcut.

Members were encouraged to be creative. In one case, skilled trades workers at the GM plant in Arlington, Texas chose not to ride bikes to get around the huge facility for their work assignments. Since this was not part of any job description, the bikes sat idle while tradespeople leisurely walked from one job to the next. This lesson was not only empowering for those involved, but for all who saw them and found their way to do their part. Now that the strike is over, how can this energy be channeled to maximize what has been won?

### Next Steps for Revitalized UAW

Scott Holdieson, an electrician at Ford Chicago Assembly and chair of Unite All Workers for Democracy (UAWD) — the rank-and-file caucus supporting the reform

slate that won the majority of the UAW leadership team — was recently asked to explain what "organizing" meant. He divided it into four categories — internal, external, community and political. That summarizes the tasks before the UAW as we continue the transformation to a more democratic and militant union.

First is understanding that the contract — an agreement between union and management — will be *implemented or violated in daily life in various workplaces*. That means every member needs to be on guard as contract provisions come into effect.

Are temporary workers hassled by foremen? Are they made permanent as the contract outlines? Are co-workers being pressured into working overtime? Are safety protocols being followed? Is management discriminating against African Americans or women?

The responsibility of enforcing the contract to the advantage of the union is not just the job of a committeeperson or other union officials, but of members, many of whom developed leadership skills during the strike. When a foreman harasses a worker, how can defending that individual force management to step back?

An immediate response from co-workers may turn into filing a group grievance, demand discussion of the issue at team meetings, or march to the plant manager's office on break time. Shop-floor vigilance can sometimes be successfully connected to the union's committee structures and develop into a plant-wide campaign. The point is *always have each other's backs*.

Second, *internal organizing can lead to external organizing*. Workers on the back dock can compile a list of which companies are delivering materials. Which come from non-union parts plants?

While the IEB is coordinating with workers in the non-union assembly plants, members can use their lists to contact workers in nearby non-union parts plants. Perhaps some members used to work there, or have relatives or friends working there — ingenuity will discover ways.

It could be an exciting project if UAW members map their plants' links to suppliers and build relationships with workers interested in being a part of the UAW. After all, UAW members are pretty good at withstanding the bullying tactics management employs and have a number of practical suggestions to pass along.

The secret to being an effective union is

acting together as a coherent and democratic body. That's true whether or not you have succeeded in winning formal unionization. And this is experience explains why UAW members are excellent at recruiting others.

The failure in past UAW organizing attempts was that it built the campaign from the outside. When workers feel vulnerable, they won't be convinced by a radio or TV ad, or even a local rally with dynamic speakers. If supervisors can harass and isolate key pro-union activists, the campaign will falter.

Enforcing the contract on a daily basis is dependent on an active membership and so is building union consciousness at a non-union work site. That's why it's good to see the perspective of the UAW IEB, which promises to help a core that is building a base inside the workplace.

Third, we saw from the Stand-Up Strike how reaching out to one's religious or social institutions, recruiting friends and family members to walk the picket lines, and encouraging them raise money or bring supplies to the food pantries energized everyone. *Community support is always a crucial element in building a strong union.*

We need to consider how the community can be integral to the struggle for workers' rights. This isn't easy given that workers no longer necessarily live in areas immediately surrounding the facilities. But in mapping this wider community, it is essential to build relationships with other unions, community organizations and institutions that share our solidaristic values. We seek to create a culture that supports transparency, encourages innovation and values equality.

### Broader Politics

The fourth element in UAW organizing is a recognition that the problems we face often need *solutions that include but go far beyond our workplace*. Many teachers, for example, have developed the concept of "bargaining for the common good." They have pointed out how issues in the community affect their working conditions and their students' well-being. They have raised issues such as housing justice and challenged the school-to-prison pipeline. This can aid us in developing strategies on how to raise some of our unmet demands at the bargaining table and beyond.

We deserve the right to a balanced work and home life, the right to quality health care at every stage of our lives and the right to retire with security. How might the individual company provide those benefits? Why is it necessary that each union have a research team on hand to cost out benefits that should be one's right as a human being? Why should workers be forced to work for an employer because of their benefits package?

Medicare for All, quality and accessible housing and education are necessary social issues unions need to support not only for

their members but for the whole working class — past, present and future.

When the UAW first won health care and pension benefits, we negotiate these benefits because we'd been unable to win them for everyone. With these benefits available to about 20% of the workforce, isn't it time to re-launch the fight for universal coverage?

When UAW President Fain raised the need for work/life balance, he recalled an interview where elderly people were asked what they regretted being unable to do over their lifetime. He noted that they never mentioned working more overtime.

When I was first hired at Ford in 1979 my work week was 50 hours one week, 58 the next. Auto workers are forced to work overtime because the industry is built on it — it's cheaper to pay time-and-a-half rather than to hire more workers. *But our lives are more than our jobs!*

Fain pointed to the old UAW slogan, "32 hours work for 40 hours pay." Increased production and automation makes this slogan more relevant today, but like the universal health care and social security, corporations are fiercely against it.

As the auto industry restructures in response to the growing environmental crisis,

it seems appropriate to raise questions not only about the length of the work day but about the work itself. Electric vehicles may help reduce fossil fuels, but they rely on the extraction of limited minerals and under horrendous conditions.

A "just transition" means good jobs along *the whole of the supply line*. It means listening to the demands miners raise and making sure we stand with them. It means working on the problems facing mining communities.

This means we are pulling the curtain back to reveal how decisions need to be calculated. *What are the total social costs?*

Given the costs, why does the individual U.S. family need one or more vehicles when they sit idle 90% of the time and require an infrastructure including garages and parking spaces? Why not reduce our footprint by designing low-cost electric cars and bikes that could be rented when needed and build free, quality and accessible mass transit?

As we rebuild our strength and unite with other unions to make sure no one is left behind, we will need to think strategically about how to implement a vision of worker solidarity and commitment to an egalitarian society. It won't be easy but by prioritizing justice, we can work toward a sustainable future. ■

## Swedish Workers Strike Tesla

ALTHOUGH ELON MUSK'S Tesla does not manufacture cars in Sweden, it does operate several repair shops there. The company did not feel the need to enter into a collective agreement with IF Metall, a 300,000 member-strong union that organizes in the auto manufacturing industry.

After unsuccessfully attempting to negotiate a contract, the union struck Tesla on October 27. Veli-Pekka Säikkälä, IF Metall's Collective Bargaining Secretary, commented:

*"This conflict is about our members' salaries, pensions and insurance. In the long run, it is also about the rules of the game throughout the Swedish labor market. Some companies should not be able to gain a competitive advantage by giving employees worse conditions than they would have with a collective agreement."*

As the union covers between 85-100% of the Swedish private sector workforce, this is an unusual fight. IF Metall signs approximately 200 local collective agreements a year in the auto sector, with no more than one strike.

More than 100 Tesla workers are officially on strike, but labor reporter and retired auto worker Lars Henriksson, writing in the *Göteborgs Posten*, visited the picket line in Hisings Backa the first week of the strike. He found some work continuing as a few were afraid of incurring the wrath of the bosses. Some had their residence permit tied to their employment; others didn't understand the point of a union.

As the strike continued into November, sympathy strikes — which are legal in Sweden and in the other Nordic countries — supported them. Dockworkers and transport workers refused to load or unload Tesla vehicles. Electricians blocked electrical charging stations; building maintenance workers union halted their work. Seko, which represents service and communications workers, stopped delivering and collecting mail and parcels at Tesla's workplaces. Examples worth following, which may be why "secondary boycotts" are banned in this country!

By early December sympathy strikes had spread to Denmark, Norway and Finland. Dockworkers in these countries pledged to continue blocking transit shipments of Tesla cars to Sweden unless an agreement is reached.

A successful contract agreement in Sweden would have implications for Musk's other factories. The company's only European factory is located in Grünheide, outside Berlin. It has a workforce of 11,000. Notices in the plant have appeared, "Our health is more important than the next billion for Elon," and those suspected were threatened with dismissal. IF Metall has started a campaign to organize the facility, with over 1,000 workers recently wearing the union's emblem at work. ■

## Lessons Learned from 45 Years Ago: “Talking Socialism” on the Job

By Garrett Brown

WITH A NEW generation of socialist activists entering the workforce to build unions and the socialist movement, experiences from 45 years ago may provide lessons about what works and what does not work when talking socialism on the job.

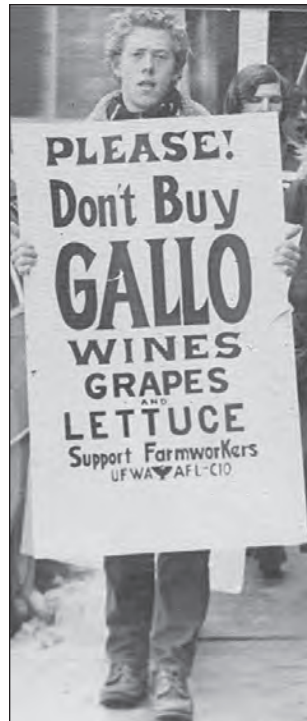
I joined the Young Socialist Alliance in 1971 and the Socialist Workers Party in 1973, resigning from the party in December 1983. I was a student activist in California, Massachusetts, and Illinois, before becoming the labor reporter for *The Daily Calumet* newspaper in southeast Chicago in 1976.

While a journalist at *The Daily Calumet* I covered the United Steel Workers of America (USWA) and Ed Sadlowski's campaign for union president in 1976-77.

I was also a member of the SWP's national “fraction” or subcommittee of USWA members, and wrote articles about the Steelworkers Fight Back campaign under the pen name of “Michael Gillespie” for the party's newspaper, *The Militant*.

Perhaps the most successful party labor work in which I was a participant was during the Steelworkers Fight Back (SFB) campaign in 1976-77. Party members were active participants, in some cases key activists, of the union election campaign run out of southeast Chicago, but involving local campaign committees around the country.

The party adopted a non-sectarian approach to promote and publicize the most radical union election platform since the 1930s, even though it was not a socialist program. [For a fuller discussion of the SFB



Garrett Brown at a United Farm Workers picket line, University of Chicago, 1976.

campaign, see my three-part series at the *Stansbury Forum* at <https://stansburyforum.com/author/garrettbrown>]

*The Militant* had extensive coverage of campaign activities and developments, including two issues of the paper with special sections on the SFB campaign, and a stand-alone pamphlet including valuable analysis of the steel industry, USWA, and broader labor movement. Socialist steelworkers were recognized for their commitment to the SFB effort by other steelworkers and at campaign headquarters.

The official tally of the election was that Sadlowski lost the election with 43% of the vote, but there were serious questions about voter fraud, particularly in the Deep South and Canada. But despite the outcome, socialist steelworkers came into contact through the SFB campaign with hundreds of workers seeking radical solutions to problems facing their union and their families.

### Turn to Industry

The SWP steel fraction held a national meeting in December 1976 in Chicago with more than 60 USWA members from seven states. National Trade Union Director Frank Lovell said the energetic two-day meeting was “reviving an old tradition in our party,” noting that the last such gathering occurred in Detroit in 1947 among SWP auto workers facing restrictions in union rights under the Taft-Hartley Act.

In addition, women steel workers in the party were active members of the “District 31 Women's Caucus” in the Chicago-Gary region, working to defend women USWA

members against company discrimination as well as sexual harassment and violence on the job. Again, socialist steelworkers were able to present an alternative political perspective to women workers, many of whom were single mothers and women of color.

In 1979, I left journalism to participate in the SWP's “turn to industry,” moving to Birmingham, Alabama, and helped found the Birmingham branch of the party. In Alabama, I worked as a production worker in two USWA-organized foundries — McWane Cast Iron Pipe and Stockham Valve and Fittings — as well as a non-union steel mini-mill.

I moved to Atlanta, Georgia, in late 1980, and worked in a series of industrial jobs including the Lockheed aircraft plant in Marietta (organized by the International Association of Machinists), the Oxford Chemicals plant (Teamsters), the Arrow Shirt factory warehouse (Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers), and the Empire Manufacturing garment plant (United Garment Workers).

I was part of the fraction of party members in these Alabama and Georgia plants and unions. Our activities were guided by the SWP's labor policy, whose primary focus was “talking socialism on the job” to gain influence and recruits for the party. Secondly we were to participate in the internal life — up to a certain point — of the unions in order to strengthen the unions' ability to defend their members.

My experiences working in industry showed that while the party's labor policy had positive aspects in raising socialist ideas and important local and national issues on the job and in the union, the net result in terms of influence and recruitment was undermined by self-limiting and self-defeating aspects of the party's approach.

Like all effective organizers, we tried to make friends and personal connections with our co-workers. This was especially the case during the employers' “probation” period (usually 30-60 days) during which management can legally fire new hires without cause.

Once we passed probation, the primary activity was conducting “socialist propaganda” in the form of selling *The Militant*, inviting coworkers to the weekly socialist forum at the party's bookstore, and campaigning for socialist candidates running for elected office.

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*Garrett Brown was a member of the Young Socialist Alliance and the Socialist Workers Party from 1971 to 1983. He worked as a production worker and member of various industrial unions from 1979 to 1983 in Birmingham, Alabama, and Atlanta, Georgia. After leaving the SWP at the end of 1983, Brown has worked for more than 30 years as an occupational health and safety professional protecting workers in California with the Cal/OSHA enforcement agency, and as volunteer Coordinator of the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network partnering with worker and community organizations in Mexico, Central America, Indonesia, southern China, and Bangladesh.*

We would deliberately plan to spend lunch and break periods with different groups of co-workers to carry on political discussions with as many people on the job as possible.

As socialists on the job we talked up national issues, like halting U.S. intervention in Central America and participating in labor solidarity actions, as well as local issues like protests against the series of murders of Black children in Atlanta.

### Defending Rights

Our union activities included encouraging co-workers to attend the regular meetings of the local union, speaking at the union meetings about local and national issues, as well as filing grievances with the local union against employer discrimination on the job, or health and safety hazards. At the same time, we sold *The Militant* in the union halls' parking lots and circulated flyers about upcoming party activities at union meetings.

Responding to employer reprisals for these activities also became a significant part of our work. This included filing union grievances against disciplinary warning letters and firings at the plant level, up to public campaigns at a national level. One dramatic example was when 15 members of the SWVP branch in Atlanta (including me) were fired all at once in December 1980, following an intensive investigation of "suspected" SWVP members by the Defense Intelligence Agency in cooperation with company security and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

At Oxford Chemicals, health and safety issues came to the fore after a series of uncontrolled exposures to chlorine and other toxic substances. Our fraction of party members circulated and filed a union grievance on the issue in June 1981, resulting in improved evacuation plans and first-aid protocols.

In September 1981, I met with a Federal OSHA compliance officer conducting an on-site inspection following worker complaints. Socialist workers regularly spoke up during the newly organized company safety trainings following the OSHA inspection.

A measure of respect and support we enjoyed at the plant was that one of the many union grievances filed after the firing of two socialists (me and the party's gubernatorial candidate) at Oxford Chemicals in 1982 was co-signed by 37 workers, two-thirds of the plant's workforce.

The amalgamated Teamsters local union representing workers at Oxford Chemicals not only undertook grievances explicitly highlighting the employer's political bias and retaliation, but also used local union resources to take cases to final-step arbitration and won the grievances.

A publicly circulated petition to reinstate us was signed by Mayor Andrew Young, State Senator Julian Bond, then City Councilman, but later Congressman John Lewis, as well as

leaders of the Atlanta NAACP and Southern Christian Leadership Conference. These various efforts generated increased publicity for the party, but, alas, did not result in our reinstatement.

Socialists were able to raise broader issues of national and world politics in union halls as well. The local Teamsters president agreed to charter a bus to take members from Atlanta to Washington, DC, for the AFL-CIO's September 1981 "Solidarity Day" demonstration for labor unity and in honor of the Solidarity union in Poland.

The union president asked me, representing the organizers of the bus, to give a slide show to the next union meeting after the event, even though the Teamsters were outside the AFL-CIO at that time. The Teamsters local also authorized official contingents, again organized by our fraction and co-workers, in marches in Atlanta protesting the series of killings of Black children, and other civil rights issue.

### Problems of Party Policy

It was a fact that the SWP's "socialist propaganda" on the job struck a chord with many workers during this time, and gained the party visibility in the workplace and union hall. However, in my view, the labor policy and internal life of the Socialist Workers Party in this period ultimately undermined our influence on the job.

The party had a blanket policy that members should not run for the unions' grievance committee, or contract bargaining committee, or the health and safety committee. The goal was to prevent personal careerism of individual members, and to prevent the party from being put in any compromising position as part of a union bureaucracy implementing policies we did not control or support.

This was a different approach than during the 1930s when SWP leaders like Farrell Dobbs and others held union positions leading the heroic Minneapolis Teamsters strikes and organizing drives. It also differed from when SWP members took local leadership positions in the United Auto Workers in the 1940s.

Clearly, holding union office is not the goal of socialist activism on the job — building a stronger union better able to defend its members and organize for fundamental social change are the key goals. But socialists in union positions

can play an important part of this effort in the right circumstances.

The party's policy, in my experience, undercut the members' credibility and influence on the job. The fact that we would not consider running for union office — even when asked and urged to do so by co-workers — gave the impression that we were all talk, and not courageous enough to "put our money where our mouths were."

We had many ideas about how the union should be run, changes that needed to be made, but we were not willing to fight for them as committee members or union officers.

Another aspect that is key to gaining influence and recruitment is how party members related to their co-workers. Effective organizing is a skill that has to be learned and honed over time, learning from mistakes, and with large grain of humility.

Successful organizers listen more than they talk, build friendships and bonds from common experiences and interests, and gain respect and credibility as workers who always pull their weight on the job and defend peers against supervisors and managers.

Many left groups in this period gave workers the impression that they knew all the questions, had all the answers, and the workers just needed to do as instructed. We Trotskyists were tagged by many with having an extra dose of this arrogance.

We knew we were right about Stalin (and Stalinists) as the gravedigger of the revolution and betrayer of socialist ideals. We knew our theory of permanent revolution was the best analysis of how revolutionary upsurges succeed or fail, and we had all the answers of what to do next.

As a result, some of the SWP members' discourse on the job often came across as pedantic and patronizing — which was the case in many internal party discussions as well. At Oxford Chemicals, I remember one co-worker telling me — after a lunch break with another co-worker who was a National



Militant Bookstore and SWP headquarters in Atlanta, 1983.

Committee member of the party — that he was not sure how much more of the “daily profundities” he could take.

### “Jack in the Box”

Related to this was the “jack-in-the-box” effect when party members passed through their industrial probation period on the job.

Fraction members were expected to immediately launch into full-on socialist proselytizing right after passing probation. This left many co-workers bewildered and amused that party members who had been quiet as church mice during probation, suddenly became irrepressible orators and aggressive salespeople.

The party’s labor policy prompted “job jumping” by members from one workplace to another. It takes a certain amount of time and jobs to get into plants which are considered “strategic” for building union power and party influence.

But the party leadership changed the priorities frequently, meaning members who had just arrived at a plant would be directed to quit in order to work elsewhere.

Clearly the goal is not be “permanently embedded” in any particular workplace, but the net effect was that many members were never in a workplace long enough to develop any social base or contacts that would lead to party influence and recruitment.

The employers’ firings, and the party’s response, also had adverse effect on organizing for socialism on the job. After our firing at Lockheed Marietta, obviously we could not list Lockheed as a previous employer. But “falsification of job application” is a firing offense, and such terminations are legal and final.

The party correctly mounted a very public defense of those fired at Lockheed. But party leaders insisted over the next three years, at several points of possible publicity in the lawsuit against the firings and during local election campaigns, that fired members “come out” at their new jobs as one of the fired Lockheed workers.

Naturally, our then-employer was happy to fire us again for falsification of job application, and rid themselves of bothersome employees. In the end, I was fired from four jobs in three years in Atlanta, and I had to move out of the city because I could not get hired or hold the job if I did.

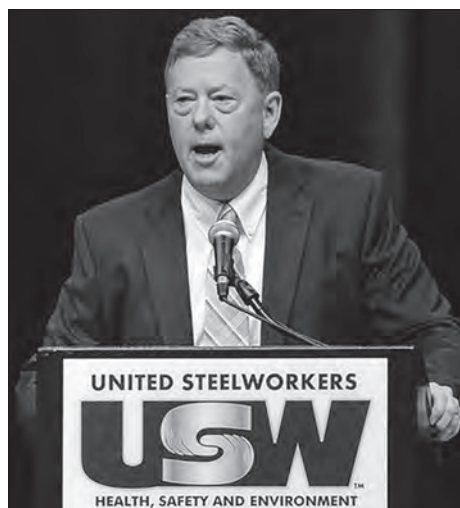
Unsurprisingly, these firings had a chilling effect on workers in the plants where we worked. No one wanted to lose their job or have more problems with the foreman for being seen as a supporter of socialists.

### Cadres and Workers

Finally, the character of the party’s internal life made it almost impossible to keep the half-dozen or so workers we recruited on the job in Birmingham and Atlanta.

As a self-designated revolutionary vanguard party, the Socialist Workers Party was a cadre organization which expected members to be professional revolutionaries. Members were “on duty” on a 24/7/365 basis, and the norm was that someone who, for example, would be away for the weekend would need to get a “leave of absence” from the party.

In the main, party members worked 40-hour-plus industrial jobs during the week; had fraction or committee meetings once or twice during the week; were expected to attend the weekly socialist forum events at the party bookstore on Friday or Saturday selling *The Militant* or collecting signatures for ballot status for socialist candidates; and spend multiple hours every Sunday in party branch meetings.



Garrett Brown receiving an award from the USWA for health and safety work in 2015.

Then on Sunday night, party members prepared to spend the next week just like we did the past week. Members were also expected to make a weekly financial “sustainer” (contribution) to the local party branch.

The handful of workers we were able to recruit often had spouses and children, responsibility for child or elder care, and previous roles in their community and its organizations, not to mention hobbies or interests of their own. The party norm was simply impossible for these recruits.

They had to choose to either have sharp and growing conflicts within their families; or have a sort of second-class membership where other party members viewed them as not making the grade because of their absences. Almost all the workers I helped recruit were gone within a year of their joining.

### Drawing Conclusions

In December 1983, I left the Socialist Workers Party and never worked as an industrial worker again. However, I have had an ongoing 35-year career since then as an occupational health and safety professional

working to protect workers as a field compliance officer for California’s OSHA agency.

I have also worked as the volunteer coordinator of an international non-governmental organization providing training and technical assistance on workplace safety with worker and community groups throughout the Global South.

I was not part of the massive purge of opposition members of the SWP in 1983, as the internal disputes were not known in the party’s branch in Atlanta where I lived at the time.

In resigning, I did not reject socialism — quite the contrary — but rather I concluded the SWP’s leadership policies would never create a social base among working people necessary to actually lead revolutionary change.

Also I believed the party’s analysis of the political moment was fatally flawed — the leadership declared the working class to be moving toward victory in the 1980s. This was at a time when strikes were totally defeated (PATCO air traffic controllers, Arizona copper miners, Greyhound bus drivers, Eastern airlines mechanics) and with millions of workers casting their votes for Ronald Reagan to become president.

*An organization that cannot tell victory from defeat will never win the confidence and loyalty of working people, nor does it deserve to.*

But my five years in industry taught me that with careful planning, a sense of humor and patience, socialist workers can become a pole of attraction in any workplace. Socialist activists were often seen as very capable people who had information and perspectives that co-workers had not heard before.

Socialists had explanations for why exploitation, poverty, and discrimination existed in capitalist societies. And socialists had a plan for addressing the root causes of these problems.

The willingness of socialists to stand up for themselves and co-workers around issues of injustice, discrimination, health and safety, and other working conditions, frequently won them respect and support from their peers.

What’s needed beyond “talking socialism on the job” is a sensible labor policy and approach, an attitude of humility and respect for fellow workers, and the commitment to learn from mistakes while always taking the initiative to organize the working class majority for a just, sustainable society worth living in. ■



# Atrocity & Delusion in the Gaza War: A Joint Israeli-U.S. Genocide

By David Finkel

THE UNITED STATES' December 8 veto of the UN Security Council emergency ceasefire resolution makes it all but official that the catastrophe engulfing Gaza and all of Palestine is a joint Israel-U.S. war of genocide. Compounding the monstrosity, the Biden administration immediately shipped hundreds of millions of dollars in new ammunition to Israel, not bothering with the formality of Congressional approval.

Further, Biden himself states that Israel is carrying out "indiscriminate bombing" — and calls for \$14 billion in a new subsidy for its Gaza massacre.

Why say genocide? It's not only that the announced death toll in Gaza, more than 18,000 as of December with close to 50,000 injuries, will be vastly exceeded by the time this issue of *Against the Current* reaches our readers. It's also increasingly evident that the Israeli government's strategic objectives include making Gaza uninhabitable for its population, and attempting to permanently drive many of them out.

This includes deliberate targeting of leading intellectual and cultural institutions and figures, as well as journalists. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's feeble bleats that Israel should "do more to avoid civilian casualties" may mark a new low in Washington's disgraceful complicity.

Elsewhere in this issue, in Purnima Bose's report we cover the harassment of liberal professors by "pro-Israel" political hacks and lobbyists for not demonstrating sufficient Zionist loyalties. Alan Wald's extensive review essay "The West Bank Inferno" concludes by discussing principles that might form the basis of a hopeful democratic and decent Palestinian-Israeli future.

The hideous contradiction, however, is that while the atrocities of October 7 and the subsequent genocidal massacre have "put Palestine back on the agenda" to quote a popular phrase, they have also set back any hope of peaceful reconciliation for many years, if not a generation.

The 1200 deaths suffered by Israel on October 7 almost equal, or slightly exceed, the total of Israeli civilians killed in suicide bombings and other attacks in the years

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Detroiters march October 25th, demanding ceasefire for Gaza.

Barbara Barefield

of the Second Intifada (2000-2005). The Palestinian deaths in Gaza alone now exceed the estimated 15,000 killed in the Nakba (according to [palestineremembered.com](http://palestineremembered.com)), and the displaced since October 7 are more than double the number driven out of Palestine in the 1947-49 war.

## Dynamics of Disaster

To confront the almost incomprehensible scope of the disaster, along with the no longer hypothetical specter of a semi-fascist dictatorship arising in Israel, it's necessary to grasp two basic dynamics.

First is the *asymmetric but symbiotic barbarisms* of the Israeli state and the Hamas nemesis that it did a great deal to empower, outlined in my previous article ("Catastrophe in Palestine and Israel: Apartheid on the Road to Genocide," *Against the Current* 227).

The fantasy that Hamas leaders were entertaining when they launched the October 7 raid is captured in a recent post by Middle East expert Gilbert Achcar (<https://gilbert-achcar.net/aqsa-flood-miscalculation>), worth citing at some length:

"After this enormous catastrophe that is on its way to completing the 1948 Nakba with a Nakba in Gaza that is still more severe and ferocious than all that preceded it, while Zionist killing and persecution are escalating in the West Bank, it is necessary to examine what

calculation might have gone through the minds of those who devised Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, leading them to launch it even though it was possible to predict what would happen as a result.

"There are two polar hypotheses in this regard: either those who planned the operation were aware that it would result in a catastrophe, like what happened so far and is still ongoing, and they did not care about the matter; or they miscalculated. The second hypothesis is the closest to reality, and this in two main respects. The first is that the planners of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood did not take the full measure of the Israeli society's complete shift to the far right, embodied in a government that includes the entire spectrum of the fascist Zionist right, from the Likud Party to the National-Religious Party and Jewish Power.

"The interaction between this political reality and the gravity of the 7 October operation, which surpassed all military operations previously carried out by the Palestinian resistance against the occupation, made inevitable that the Israeli reaction would exceed, in turn, everything the Zionist army had ever done before, and that the Zionist far right would seize the opportunity of this trauma to begin implementing its plan to achieve 'Greater Israel' by erasing what remains of Palestine and annihilating its people through extermination and displacement, starting with

continued on page 27

# “Antisemitism” Weaponized: The Battle at Indiana University

By Purnima Bose

[The broadside attacks launched in Congress against pro-Palestinian activism exploded into the headlines with demands for the resignations of the presidents of Harvard, MIT, and the University of Pennsylvania who has already been forced out. The following account details a struggle unfolding at a major Midwestern public campus — ed.]

ON NOVEMBER 15, 2023 Representative Jim Banks (IN-03) sent Indiana University President Pamela Whitten a letter demanding information about antisemitic incidents at IU that had occurred following the horrifying October 7 Hamas attacks in Israel.

Banks also inquired about the status of the IU Antisemitism Advisory Board. His letter cites concerns about several campus demonstrations organized by what he calls the “Palestinian Solidarity Committee” — he means the Palestine Solidarity Committee — and the resignation of two IU Student Government [IUSG] representatives claiming that the IUSG president is “blatantly antisemitic” and unwilling “to work with Jewish students.”<sup>1</sup>

Filmsy on evidence that these incidents are antisemitic, Banks’ letter expresses zero concern about Islamophobia or racism on campus. Banks further reminds President Whitten that “If IU administrators condone or tolerate antisemitism, the university could lose access to federal funding” under provisions of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act.

His letter is part of a larger partisan trend, in Indiana and nationally, to erode academic freedom through legislative incursions in college curricula, the wielding of threats to defund academic units that do not conform to narrow belief systems, criminalizing K-12 teachers for showing compassion to their LGBTQ+ students, and prosecuting librarians who do not censor materials deemed “harmful to minors.”<sup>2</sup>

Responding to Banks’ letter, IU faculty member Jeffrey C. Isaac wrote an “Open Letter on Academic Freedom at Indiana University, Bloomington,” signed by an additional 221 IU faculty colleagues, that expresses alarm at “the threatening tone of [Banks’] letter, the way in which it injects ideology into the proper governance of the university” and “conflates academic leadership with the

policing of controversial ideas.” (Full disclosure: I am one of the original signatories.)

Denouncing antisemitism and Islamophobia as forms of hate speech, the Open Letter emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between “real anti-Jewish conduct” and “pro-Palestinian advocacy.”

## Conflict Over Academic Freedom

The Open Letter also acknowledges tensions on campus among students in the wake of the unfolding tragedy in the Middle East.

“A campus is a place where young people come to learn, to expand their horizons, and to test out ideas and political convictions within the bounds of the law. It is not uncommon for college students to assume strong political positions and sometimes to speak in ways that offend others or strain the limits of academic freedom,” the letter reads.

While urging the IU administration to guarantee the safety of everyone on campus, the Open Letter explains that faculty “do not believe that any administration should be pressured to treat controversial political speech as a security threat, or to use legitimate safety concerns as a pretext to stifle academic freedom.”<sup>3</sup>

In a subsequent article published in *The Nation*, Isaac describes Representative Banks’ cynical opportunism.<sup>4</sup> A declared candidate for the U.S. Senate, Banks is an acolyte of Donald Trump and was one of the 147 Republicans who voted to overturn the 2020 presidential election results. He characterizes the January 6 insurrectionists as quintessentially American. According to Banks, “coming to the Capitol and protesting, speaking out, marching around the Capitol mall holding signs” bespeaks civic engagement.

As Banks had never been outspoken about antisemitism before, his current outrage looks suspiciously like an attempt to broaden his electoral base beyond MAGA voters.

Banks’ response to the faculty’s Open Letter was predictable given his dubious distinction as the founder and leader of the “Anti-Woke Caucus,” a group of 26 House Republicans which has vowed, in Banks’ words, “to root out all all [sic] far-left political programs from the federal government.”<sup>5</sup>

In practice, this goal takes aim at public

health measures and rejects science by introducing a handful of amendments to appropriation bills, targeting the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Defense.

Amendments include prohibiting masking and vaccination mandates for civilian and military DoD employees, and defunding DHS’s climate literacy strategy. The caucus also passed a ridiculous proposal to reduce DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas’ salary to \$1.<sup>6</sup>

Banks claims to have a “very specific” definition of “wokeness,” which, in actuality, is quite expansive and presupposes a broad leftist conspiracy. For him, “wokeness” means those who believe:

*“(A)ll the so-called oppressor groups must be punished for their past and present alleged sins. There are many steps to punishing them: inducing self-hatred through indoctrination, stripping away their rights by not enforcing the laws on their behalf, public humiliation, hatred, expropriation and ultimately violence. That’s what the Left has done so far. It’s not exactly clear yet how far this can go.”<sup>7</sup>*

Indeed, charges of wokeness are often leveled at people who champion universal dignity, including civil liberties and the right to safety for all, regardless of religion, race, nationality, gender and sexual identity. Banks’ disparagement of wokeness signals his opposition to the innate dignity of all people, a value that one would hope is shared by our elected leaders.

Opposition to wokeness is clearly a priority for Banks. On the social media platform X, he posted his response to the faculty Open Letter: “Woke liberal professors justifying their anti-semitic and anti-American activity brainwashing our kids to hate America and Israel...”<sup>8</sup>

Charging the signatories of the Open Letter — a significant number of whom are Jewish, and who believe that universal dignity is entirely consistent with core Jewish beliefs — with antisemitism is absurd.

Banks’ tweet should concern everyone who abhors antisemitism. By accusing liberal professors of antisemitism, he deflects attention from the real perpetrators of violence against Jews and people of color on campus and in the community. Hint: they are not the liberals or the progressives.

Purnima Bose is an editor of *Against the Current*. The views expressed here are her own.

## Antisemitism and Racism for Real

Representative Banks is right to worry about antisemitism and, one would hope, other forms of hatred in Bloomington. In 1983, Beth Shalom Jewish Religious and Community Center was firebombed by the white supremacist group the Covenant, Sword and Arm of the Lord. Thankfully, there were no injuries in this attack.<sup>9</sup>

Tragically, that was not the case in 1999 when IU graduate student Won-Joon Yoon was gunned down by a member of the World Church of the Creator, another white supremacist group. The gunman had earlier embarked on a shooting spree in the Chicago area, murdering former Northwestern coach Ricky Byrdsong, who was African American, and injuring other African Americans, Asian Americans and Orthodox Jews.<sup>10</sup>

Since then Bloomington has been periodically papered with neo-Nazi flyers posted by outside groups such as the Patriot Front and KKK.<sup>11</sup> According to the Southern Poverty Law Center, as of this 2023, 29 white supremacist organizations are active in Indiana, an increase of 10 since 2020.<sup>12</sup>

Everyone is endangered by *actual antisemitism*, which triggers and becomes a model for all kinds of violent hate crimes. When Banks and other politicians point the finger of antisemitism at liberal professors and nonviolent student protestors critical of Israeli state policies, in practice they abet white supremacist perpetrators of violent hate crimes by directing attention away from them.

Following the publication of Isaac's *Nation* article, Banks posted a message on X, red-baiting and evoking the ugly specter of McCarthyism and Nazism. Calling Isaac a "Radical Marxist professor," he urged: "if you're also a communist buy his latest book on Amazon!," a reference to an edition of the *Communist Manifesto* that Isaac edited and for which he wrote an introduction.<sup>13</sup>

Banks' tweet follows earlier patterns of authoritarian righteousness. During the McCarthy era, the redbaiting of nuanced thinkers because they did not conform to rigid partisan beliefs resulted in people losing jobs, having their careers ruined and families destroyed; some people were forced to leave the country and others even committed suicide.

In his verbal attack on a liberal Jewish professor for being a Marxist and a "communist" (Isaac is neither), let's hope that Banks did not consciously intend to echo Hitler's hatred of Jews and communists, whom the Nazi leader often denounced together with the terms "Jewish Bolshevism" or "Judeo-Bolshevism."<sup>14</sup>

If Banks were serious about combatting antisemitism, he would support, or at least not attack, liberal professors like Isaac, who have been on the frontline of campaigns against antisemitism and hate speech of all



Rabbis for Ceasefire action in Washington, DC.

Instagram

kinds for decades.

If we are to stop the terrible violence that continues to wrack the Middle East, we need diplomacy and not name calling. Representative Banks' rhetoric is entirely consistent with Trump's hate-mongering and can only clutter the path towards peace. But maybe that is his goal: to sow endless division and perpetual discord among us. ■

### Notes

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## The Ghetto is Being Liquidated

[The following is an excerpt from Masha Gessen's *New Yorker* essay "In the Shadow of the Holocaust" (December 9, 2023). The Heinrich Boll Foundation and Senate of the city of Bremen in Germany withdrew their support of the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought to Gessen, which she then received at a smaller venue.]

"FOR THE LAST the last seventeen years, Gaza has been a hyperdensely populated, impoverished, walled-in compound where only a small fraction of the population had the right to leave for even a short amount of time — in other words, a ghetto. Not like the Jewish ghetto in Venice or an inner-city ghetto in America but like a Jewish ghetto in an Eastern European country occupied by Nazi Germany.

"In the two months since Hamas attacked Israel, all Gazans have suffered from the barely interrupted onslaught of Israeli forces. Thousands have died. On average, a child is killed in Gaza every ten minutes. Israeli bombs have struck hospitals, maternity wards, and ambulances. Eight out of ten Gazans are now homeless, moving from one place to another, never able to get to safety.

"The term 'open-air prison' seems to have been coined in 2010 by David Cameron, the British Foreign Secretary who was then Prime Minister... Presumably, the more fitting term "ghetto" would have drawn fire for comparing the predicament of besieged Gazans to that of ghettoized Jews. It also would have given us the language to describe what is happening in Gaza now. The ghetto is being liquidated." ■





*Palestinian funeral on the West Bank — these days a daily occurrence as military and settler violence escalates.*

## Israel's West Bank Inferno: The Responsibility of Socialists

By Alan Wald

### **A Day in the Life of Abed Salama:**

Anatomy of a Jerusalem Tragedy

By Nathan Thrall

New York: Metropolitan Books, 2023, 255 pages, \$29.99 hardback.

FOR THOSE READERS unfamiliar with the universe of suffering that structures Palestinian life on the West Bank, prepare yourself for a journey into a human-made political hell as you plunge into the pages of Nathan Thrall's *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama*. The term "West Bank" refers to a land-locked area the size of Delaware near the Mediterranean Sea that has been militarily commanded by the Israeli state ever since it was captured from Jordan in the 1967 "Six Day War."

From that time on, the three million Palestinian residents of the West Bank have endured a subjugation that circumscribes their everyday lives through laws governing the right to movement and regulating everything from where one can live to what personal identification cards one can hold. Families who reside just a mile away from each other are separated by checkpoints and partitions.

Added to this is an ever-tightening control of Palestinian quotidian existence through violent night raids, arrests, shootings, air strikes, military dividing lines, torching of fields, vandalization of property, and the building of more and more Israeli settlements.

Due to the alteration of demographics and transferring of populations, these settlements are considered illegal under

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Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention and many declarations of the United Nations Security Council.

By now there are all the ingredients for a pressure cooker destined to explode, and it is impossible to predict what will happen in the coming weeks and months in connection with the situation in Gaza. There is an uptick in settler violence with hundreds of Palestinians being killed, and fear of a wider war.

Most people have only a hazy picture of the West Bank, which came under partial civil control of the Palestinian National Authority (run by Fatah, a longtime nationalist political party) in certain areas (those known as "A" and "B") following the 1993-95 Oslo Accords. The landscape consists of 165 "islands" of Palestinian towns and refugee camps surrounded by a contiguous area of 230 Israeli "settlements;" the latter include armed Jewish supremacists fanatically devoted to a complete takeover of what they insist are their ancient biblical homelands of "Judea" and "Samaria."

In the new millennium, Israel built a barrier, which it calls the "Separation Fence" and Palestinians have named a "Wall of Apartheid;" it is now 440 miles long cutting through, encircling, and imprisoning the Palestinian territory under occupation. Two sets of rules exist: one for the settlers, who are treated with all the rights of full Israeli citizens, and another for the Palestinians, who face a draconian array of protocols for the occupied.

The situation has many similarities to the Gaza strip, although Israel has controlled all access to Gaza through a blockade since 2005 and Hamas (a spinoff of the Sunni Islamist Muslim Brotherhood) has governed it since 2007.

## Abandon All Hope

After the wall was built, Palestinians have had to spend hours waiting at barriers to get from Bethlehem to East Jerusalem, a part of occupied Palestine with 361,700 Palestinians and 234,000 Israeli Jewish settlers, just six miles away.

This bureaucratic nightmare is in the context of an Israeli state of 9.73 million inhabitants (73.5% Jewish) that is an economic success, the world's leading start-up nation with a GDP per capita surpassing France and the UK. It is a wealthy, nuclear-armed military superpower sitting right next to five million dispossessed and stateless Palestinians.

As we near the end of the sixth decade of this illegal West Bank occupation, one might well expect to see "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here" inscribed on any entrance gate of what amounts to nothing less than Israel's grotesque enactment of Foucault's "biopolitics." Foucault used this term to describe how states exercise control over a subjugated, large population through institutions that regulate individual bodies and aggregate them into groups, which must be managed.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see Nathan Thrall's non-fiction narrative as simply a trauma dump. There are, after all, moments of family and comradely affection, joyful cultural celebrations, and actions of resistance.

True, your guide through numerous Dantean circles of dread and distress in *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama* won't be the poet Virgil of *The Divine Comedy*. The Jewish American writer Thrall, however, is a skilled journalist and author of the acclaimed *The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine* (2017).

He is also the former director of the Arab-Israeli Project of the left-leaning global think tank, the International Crisis Group. Through his 250 pages of well-crafted and often understated prose, one descends to the fiendish center of a realm of many hurts and humiliations, but the narrative is rooted in compelling and enlightening family backstories.

The method is to present granular and nuanced biographical portraits of Palestinians and Jews alike, recreated with an eye for complexities and contradictions on all sides. Perhaps it's an approach that can reach people who otherwise seem to have fingers in their ears, or respond with knee-jerk defensiveness in a self-righteous manner, when one raises even the mildest critique of the brutality of the Israeli state.

## The Heart of the Story

At the heart of *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama* is the account of a terrible bus accident that was not simply "an accident," but closer to a predictable outcome of a history of inequality and discrimination. The calamitous event happened in 2012, resulting in the death and maiming of dozens of Palestinian children who were on a school trip, including Milad Salama, the five-year-old son of Abed and Haifa Salama.

The bus itself was illegally registered, 27 years old, and its route was on neglected, congested roads consigned to Palestinians and inferior to those used by settlers — ones termed "bypass roads" or "apartheid roads." Those used by Milad's bus were devoid of lighting, any kind of police presence, or even a barrier separating the lane of oncoming traffic.

After being hit by a trailer truck, the aging vehicle flipped and burst into flames. Still, no Israeli or Palestinian rescue personnel showed up in time to assist and save lives: "When a Palestinian

ambulance finally arrived, most of the injured children had already been evacuated [in the private cars of Palestinian passers-by] .... The bus was still crackling with flames and there was much shouting and commotion. Not a single firefighter, police officer, or soldier had come." (101)

According to Thrall, the death of Milad and six others was the likely result of these and other circumstances faced by the Palestinian population of Anata, a West Bank town of the Salama family that was mostly encircled by a separation barrier.

Obstacles to the rescue include partitions that did not allow the Palestinian Authority access to the road where the accident took place; an Israeli police force that habitually ignored Palestinians in distress; the system of special passes that prevented Palestinian parents from traveling to the diverse hospitals in different zones where the children had been driven by other Palestinians in their own cars; and much more.

But the ambitions of the book go far beyond the origins of the horrific event to slowly unravel a larger history of this architecture of separation, one that ultimately stems from the *Nakba*. This was the "catastrophe" of mass dispossession and displacement of Palestinians by the Jewish fighters in the 1948 war, followed by the all-important denial of the "right of return" that ensued.

After the death of Milad, the first 67 pages retrospectively flesh out the daily lives of Abed, Haifa and more than a dozen other Palestinians to create a fuller picture that achieves an uncommon depth of perception and understanding.

Thrall puts the reader at eye level and uses real names of all but a few individuals. This allows us to see how specific features of ethnic oppression by design render far worse what are ordinary problems of humanity: the thwarting of romantic love, unrealized ambition, jealousy, local rivalries, problematic local customs, and health.

As the book progresses to the occurrence of the "accident" and what follows, Thrall uses this technique to implicitly expose the lies that make up the elaborate myths now sustaining the pro-Israel state of mind in the United States. Full documentation for his claims is presented at the end of the volume in the section called "Sources."

For example, the narrative of Huda Dahbour, a doctor employed by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency and the mother of another victim, Hadi, provides a harrowing description of the *Nakba* experienced by her family:

*"Through Arabic radio broadcasts and vans equipped with loudspeakers, the Jewish forces blared instructions to evacuate immediately. The conquering battalion had been ordered to firebomb 'all objectives that can be set alight' and 'kill every Arab encountered.' Barrels stuffed with kerosene-soaked rags and fitted with ignition devices were sent hurtling downhill into the Palestinian areas.... Much of the city was ethnically cleansed by the time Passover began." (89)*

## Mizrahi and Ashkenazi

Then there is a history of the Adam settlement, near Anek's Anata, which had been created on the West Bank for poor Mizrahi (Middle Eastern and Sephardic) Jews by the Israeli government and tax-payer-funded World Zionist Organization. In contrast to the miserable conditions of the Palestinians of Anata, who mostly live in a walled ghetto, the residents of Adam had spacious single-family villas with yards and bucolic

views.

But the tale told through the life of founder Beber Vanunu is far from idyllic. While a small proportion of Israeli Jews have a long history in Palestine (11% of the population was Jewish by the 1920s), over 50% of the present Israeli population is of Middle Eastern and North African descent who were frequently refugees from Arab persecution, and even expulsion from their native countries.

Beber was born in Casablanca in 1952, and his family relocated from Morocco to Israel two years later. There they found themselves in a densely-packed transit camp, fenced-in and guarded by police, without running water and adequate sanitation:

*"Israel's elite treated the Mizrahim with contempt...Parents of more than a thousand Mizrahi children accused the government of falsely reporting their babies' deaths and then secretly handing them to Ashkenazi [of European background] parents wishing to adopt...Israeli officials had justified the deceit on the grounds that the Mizrahim were 'backward' and the abductions were in 'the best interests of the children.'" (150)*

After leaving the camps, some of Beber's relatives moved into houses stolen from Palestinians, while he lived with nine others in a single room in a crime-and-drug ridden Jerusalem tenement. Then came a period of activism in the Israeli Black Panthers, a Mizrahi radical group inspired by the African American Black Panther Party, that protested ethnic and class discrimination. It also evidenced some sympathy with the Palestine Liberation Organization, a secular national movement founded in 1964 to represent the Palestinian people.

Beber subsequently developed a proposal to establish a Mizrahi settlement on the West Bank land that officially belonged to the Palestinian village of Jaba. In a dubious effort to establish good relations with their neighbors, villagers from Jaba were given jobs as domestic workers and laborers (not as professionals) as the illegal settlement continued to expand eastward. At the time of the bus accident, Beber offered condolences by posting a large banner expressing sympathy at the Jaba checkpoint.

Ashkenazi Jews, whose ancestors had settled in Central and Eastern Europe and comprise close to one-third of the Israeli population, are partially represented by the story of Dany Tirza.

Dany, former head of the Israeli Defense Force's strategic planning for the West Bank (the IDF Rainbow Administration), and then architect of the separation barrier, was at the time of the bus crash the leader of the Jewish settlement built on land confiscated from Anata. He had been born in Galicia (then in Western Ukraine) into a family divided among various political and religious loyalties.

Those committed to Haredi (ultra-orthodox) Judaism, and who rejected Zionism, died in the Holocaust; those aligned with his grandfather, a Marxist-Zionist of Hashomer Hatzair, moved to Palestine and thrived. This family history reminds us that contemporary Zionism cannot be understood without considering the murder of Jews from the time even before the Czarist pogroms to the German concentration camps with their industrial genocide.

That is, Zionism was not born of ancient Judaism of the Middle East, but of European Ashkenazi Jews in Eastern and Central Europe in the context of its competing racial and ethnic nationalisms. This memory of antisemitic attacks and extermination was built into the Zionist DNA of the hundreds of thousands of survivors who poured from Europe into the majority Arab, multi-religious Palestine with the dream of turning it into a nationalist Jewish state.

The memory has now been passed on to their descendants, especially after allusions to the Holocaust became a major rhetorical tool of the Israeli government in the 1980s as it tried to depict the resistance of the Indigenous population as the reincarnation of Europe's demonic, antisemitic past.

The accurate invocation of this European victimization of Jews was now used to rationalize the Israeli state's role as the victimizer of Palestinians.

## Failures of Oslo

Other stories fill in the picture from many angles. References to the ill effects of the Oslo Accords are peppered throughout the narrative. Early on, we are told: "In

fact, Oslo had furthered Israel's goal of holding on to maximal land with minimal Palestinians on it." (55)

Later, Thrall explains: "...the lives of the insiders [local Palestinians] only got worse after Oslo. On top of greater restrictions on movement, employment plummeted as Israel replaced Palestinian laborers with foreign workers, recruited mostly from Asia...The figures close to [Yasir] Arafat pocketed tens of millions of dollars of public money, much of it funneled through a Tel Aviv bank account, and some even profited from the building of [Jewish] settlements." (91)

Thrall concludes by reporting that, for a long while after the bus accident, Abed and his family closed themselves off from any social interaction. Their nearest relations rarely saw them. Then, seven months following the funeral of Milad, Abed deleted all videos of his son, as well as practically all photos.

The community itself was traumatized; every Palestinian in the area knew where they were on the day that the "Jaba bus accident" happened.

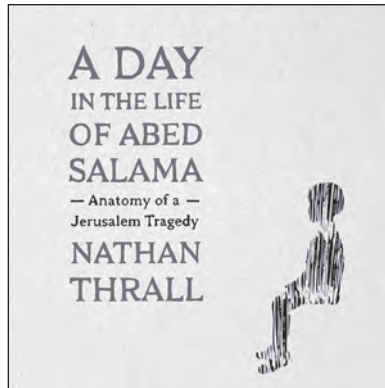
Yet this trauma was also felt in circumstances of growing repression where most Palestinians, including children, who are arrested for any number of small infractions, are judged in military courts. They are then handed lengthy sentences in what critics call sham military trials as many Palestinians are deprived of defense lawyers and due process.

Israeli citizens, of course, are tried in civil courts, highlighting the two-tier justice system. Still, throughout these interpolations of personal history and political context, Thrall is less focused on ultimate solutions than lived realities.

## Feats of Omission

In following Thrall's process of rendering these lives in *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama*, I continually felt provoked to pursue the question raised at the outset of this review.

How does one reach those of our fellow citizens who are still deluded into thinking of the Israeli state as a democratic model of "Jewish self-determination"? Their bias prevents





Waiting in line at a West Bank checkpoint.

them from seeing this state form as a callous apartheid regime dedicated to supplanting the Arab population with a settler-colonial presence, through a familiar process even if different in specifics.

Thrall doesn't say it explicitly, but any informed reader can see the ugly parallels to white supremacist South Africa in the Occupied Territories, and to the Jim Crow system of the U.S. South within the infamous "Green Line" that has defined the Israeli state's internationally recognized borders (supposedly temporarily) since 1949.

As Edward Said and others have pointed out, this is not simply a conflict of two national minorities but also a "unique colonialism."

How then to break through the feats of historical omission in the widespread pro-Israeli propaganda that perpetuates a fictional Israeli past? A falsification that omits the ethnic cleansing of the Indigenous population to proclaim instead the miraculous 1948 founding of a moral and peace-loving state, above all beleaguered by a Nazi-like antisemitism among Arabs?

This constant invocation of Hitler is a willful mischaracterization of complex issues to score political points, but the upshot in practice is to make Palestinians pay the price for fascist crimes which they did not perpetrate. It promotes the premise that the ongoing crisis must be contained by force without being resolved by justice; that Israel, threatened by another Holocaust, has the right to do anything to survive.

The resulting mentality seems like a puzzle without a solution to those of us with a socialist-international perspective: How can people whose ancestors were so hideously oppressed by the Nazis be so oblivious to human rights and lives? How can one understand their moral universe?

It seems a painful and brain-stretching paradox, suggesting

that one is not dealing with reason. Antisemitism of the past was horrific, and new manifestations remain a real threat in the world that must be opposed; but the foundation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is different.

The Holocaust was inflicted upon a marginalized, powerless group facing an all-powerful army and state violence; today it is the Palestinians who are stateless and the Israelis who have the advanced military that places the Palestinians under siege and occupation. Anyone with access to maps can see that creeping annexation has been unfolding for generations, along with a continuum of violent destruction against what was the majority population.

The issue of educating the public about Zionist expansion and apartheid has achieved only greater urgency following the brutally shocking October 7 attack by Hamas that Israel declares to have included 70% civilians among the approximately 1200 people slain. Uncertainty remains about some details of the massacre; claims of beheadings by Hamas are in dispute but evidence for horrific rapes and despicable sexual torture by Hamas or other factions seem credible according to *New York Times* reporting on December 5.

Whatever is ultimately concluded, the assault on civilians was an atrocity, and then was immediately followed by a far bloodier revenge fest of the Israeli state that has crossed a death toll of 15,500 and displaced 1.8 million Palestinians (80% of Gaza) as I write.

Marxists certainly do not have a shared world-outlook with Hamas, but for pro-Israel partisans to denounce Hamas for committing war crimes against humanity and then turn around and endorse Israel's committing the same crimes tenfold is enough to make any hypocrisy meter zoom to the max. In neither case can one evade confronting the issue of killing civilians.

It makes no difference whether this reality of annihilating families is dodged under the declaration that those attacked in Israel were all “occupiers” (including perhaps two dozen workers and agricultural students from Thailand, Naipaul, and the Philippines, along with Bedouin), or that those being murdered in Gaza are not the intended targets because they are being used by Hamas as “human shields.” This is just clever phrasing in both instances.

Civilian deaths are civilian deaths, whether from hand-grenades thrown into shelters or 2000-pound bombs dropped on a city and refugee camps. Intentionally targeting civilians to frighten a population is a definition of “terrorism,” regardless of whether it is carried out by those who are desperate and who have few options, or by the mightiest state in the region.

That does not mean, of course, that any Palestinian who fights back is a “terrorist.” One needs to explain the context of settler-colonialism that brought about this kind of ruthless conduct by a group, and emphasize that violent oppression produces violent reaction when non-violent efforts are harshly crushed and delegitimized.

Nevertheless, clarification is not the same as backing specific behavior that any socialist ought to abhor. The ghastly asymmetry on the side of Israeli violence is obvious, but the killing of Jewish babies in the name of “resistance” and “liberation” is not what we stand for.

Nor does the fact that Zionist cruelty set the stage for ferocious retaliation — which is seen in most colonial rebellions — mean that Palestinians allied with Hamas lack human agency. It is condescending and paternalistic to describe Hamas as not at all responsible for October 7, as merely Pavlovian vectors of a rage induced by Israel.

The evidence that the rule of Hamas in Gaza was propped up by the Israeli state, and not supported by most Palestinians, is another critical part of the picture.

## The Right of Resistance

Radicals know that the right of armed struggle, which the Palestinians surely have, does not translate into “anything goes.” Palestinian resistance is necessary, and a willingness to fight back should be championed. Nevertheless, robotically approving what Hamas did after its stunning breakout from the imprisonment of Gaza is as insupportable as endorsing the Hamas suicide bombings of buses during the Second Intifada of 2000-2005.

On the other hand, West Bank Palestinians arming themselves for self-defense against the settlers and soldiers who are destroying their homes and livelihoods is perfectly reasonable; and many activists have made compelling arguments that the tactics used in the first Intifada of 1987-93 and the 2018-19 Great March of Return were far more successful in gaining much-needed world sympathy than any terrorist assaults.

While bombings and kidnappings reap immediate attention and are headline-grabbing, they can be straightaway exploited to reinforce the racist image that the West always aspires to create of the colonially oppressed as immoral, irrational, and luridly inhumane.

For socialists, the aim is to win a massive number of supporters to the goal of permanently dismantling the political and economic structures of oppression. It is not to follow the Israeli state strategy — trying to kill one’s way out of this

challenging situation — especially where the relationship of military force is so uneven.

We cannot imitate the Zionist method of closing our eyes to human suffering that one thinks is not ideologically useful. Only deluded zealots expunge ethical concerns and reduce everything to what they try to spin as immediate political gains.

The demand for a permanent ceasefire in the current Israeli slaughter in Gaza, and halting the escalating settler violence in the West bank, are now the paramount public priority — slogans, petitions, mass actions. Still, the Left within its own venues sorely needs to think about the future. What should be the next step in terms of our demands around which to mobilize and educate?

This surely means our discussing whether this type of violence — killing civilians, claiming they are occupiers — really moves the needle forward toward Palestinian liberation in some way. Or does it strengthen the hardline Zionist fanatics and weaken elements of the Israeli Left — the Peace Camp favoring dialogue, the Human Rights NGOs — who need to grow and become more militant?

In discussing what might be effective resistance, one is not talking about offering “moral instruction” from afar or blaming the victims for not coming up with one’s preferred political leadership. The germane and indispensable history of the Left is filled with informative debates examining and evaluating the various factions in national liberation struggles.

For example, in the Irish national struggle as it unfolded in the late 20th century, socialists were split in support of the “Official” Irish Republican Army, the “Provisional” Irish Republican Army, Peoples Democracy, and many other groups claiming to represent resistance.

During the Algerian Revolution of 1954-62, many on the Marxist Left were divided between support for the National Liberation Front (NLF) and the National Algerian Movement (MNA). In the case of Iraq, almost everyone on the Left was against the U.S. occupation but no one in their right mind supported ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).

Those who mistakenly believe that support for “resistance” translates into uncritical acceptance of the Hamas ideology and strategy are ignoring this rich legacy of Left debate, and effectively trying to silence the discussion of crucial issues.

Nonetheless this discussion is essential, especially because we need to hear the voices of the many on the Palestinian Left who do not support Hamas, and other fully informed people; and they must be able to forward alternatives without being smeared as shills of Zionism.

For example, this is a crucial moment to read and discuss Rashid Khalidi’s indispensable *The Hundred Years War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017* (2020), with its careful critique of the strengths and weaknesses of past resistance strategies by various organizations and movements, as well as the duplicitous role of the authoritarian Arab states in the region. And also, to take another look at the references to Palestinian resistance in *Confronting Empire* (2000) and *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad* (2006), works by a Pakistani political scientist active in the Algerian revolution and associated with anti-Zionism.

It is elementary Marxism, elaborated clearly by Lenin, that to unconditionally support the *content* of a liberation struggle

in principle does not mean to *uncritically* support every strategy or tactic that emerges.

In the case of Hamas, there is also the matter of assessing its overall ideology; Hamas may, of course, evolve and certainly has contradictions among its statements, but can we simply shut our eyes when confronted with evidence that its past has been socially reactionary, brutal and antisemitic? Solidarity should not mean suppressing hard truths.

The alternative view, that support for a liberation or resistance movement requires that one refrain from criticizing its various leaderships only eliminates from consideration those constructive and honest opinions that are based on careful analysis. The result is uncritical cheerleading from the safety and comfort of social media, which is more in the style of the “useful idiots” of Zionist nationalism than critical-minded Marxist internationalism.

Moreover, unnecessarily inflammatory, cavalier and performative rhetoric to bolster one’s revolutionary credentials can be as unhelpful to building a mass movement now as the slogans “Burn Baby Burn” and “Bring the War Home” were during the Vietnam War. “Community Control of Police” and “Bring the Troops Home Now” were far more effective in reaching those not yet radicalized.

## Zionism’s War Against Jews

However, the talking points of ready-made phrases promoted by pro-Israel partisans are a genre of cynical deception unto themselves. The constant iteration that Israel has the right to “defend” itself is an excuse for an indiscriminate massacre that will blot the reputation of the Israeli state for eternity, and its actual aim is to humiliate, demoralize and ethnically cleanse the Palestinian population.

The Biden administration’s claim that it has pressured Israel to “do more to protect innocent lives” cannot be taken seriously. In fact, the constant mouthing of such pious platitudes is a sharp reminder that liberalism is not enough.

The “human shield” argument about Hamas has been shown to be a figleaf to justify making everything in Gaza a legitimate target. The greatest of all no-brainers is that Israel’s slaughtering thousands of civilians is the surest way to recruit to Hamas, and guaranteed to drive the population into the arms of successor groups that will be even more desperate to revenge the human suffering imposed on them by the Israeli state.

Organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) have long placed defending the Israeli state from criticisms of anti-racist activists above the fighting of the real, existing antisemitism of white supremacists. In their warped calculus, it is acceptable to hate Jews as long as one loves the Israeli state.

While allowing the antisemitic televangelist John Hagee to address their November 14 “March for Israel,” and praising the neo-Nazi conspiracist Elon Musk for “fighting hate,” they include among their main targets the mostly young Jewish supporters of Jewish Voice for Peace and If Not Now.

Knowing that these Jews, in collaboration with Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and other pro-Palestinian social justice organizations, are anti-racists who revile antisemitism, the pro-Israel groups cynically use the threat of this accusation of antisemitism to intimidate and silence. The insistence that certain phrases, chants, or slogans — usually ripped out of

context — constitute Jew-hatred are now so widespread on campuses, in businesses, within the Democratic and Republican parties, and even in the art world, that a resemblance to the blacklisting of the 1950s anti-radical witchhunt is hard to miss.

At the same time, it is not quite accurate to say that the ADL and other pro-Israel forces declare “any critique of Israel to be antisemitic.” Liberal Zionists themselves have many disagreements with the Netanyahu government, and some are opposed to expanding the settlements.

Even Senator Chuck Schumer made the point in *The New York Times* on November 29 that “criticizing the Israeli government isn’t inherently antisemitic,” and instead pointed his finger at “the denial of a Jewish state in any form.” Thus, the main (but not exclusive) focus for the accusation of antisemitism has been the call for some form of a democratic state in Palestine/Israel, precisely because the evidence is now so overwhelming that the ethno-state of Israel cannot be that “democracy.”

This Zionist war against internationalist Jews is among the many reasons why Jews on the Left must fight back against the defamatory slanders propagated by those who falsely claim to be carrying out their monstrous activities in our name — thereby joining the future of Jews to Zionism’s iniquitous project. Here we must be aware of the language game carried out by Schumer and others to obfuscate our goals and values.

Our arguments to transform Israel as a modern secular state that treats all citizens alike are caricatured as “uniquely signaling out” and “demonizing.” And the appeal for a de-Zionized transformation of the Israeli state is regularly “interpreted” as “destruction of Israel” in a manner implying the elimination of the Jewish population.

This is a topic well-addressed in Marc Lamont Hill and Mitchell Plitnick’s *Except for Palestine: The Limits of Progressive Politics* (2021). The gist can be summarized in this complete sentence: Israel does not have “the right to exist” in the form of an expansionist ethno-nationalist state that is based on the dispossession of and denial of equal rights for the indigenous majority. To equate this specific state form with “Jewish self-determination” is similar to claiming “states’ rights” as a cover for maintaining the Jim Crow U.S. South.

Of course, socialists are certainly not opposed to a Jewish state in principle, but as with any other nationalist demand, the question is *where* and *how*. A colonial project of removal and deprivation of the indigenous people, who in this case were the greater part of the inhabitants, crosses the line anyplace it has occurred.

Moreover, the prospect for future Jewish security, dependent on an expansionist ethnostate, is very much in doubt because of what the present situation of Zionist hegemony has brought about. It’s no secret that as the Zionist juggernaut continues to ruthlessly charge forward toward a “Greater Israel,” Israel is more controversial than ever before; the claim that Jews are safer there than elsewhere is less and less convincing.

Here I can recommend the fine 1969 pamphlet by Trotskyist George Novack, *How Can the Jews Survive? A Socialist Answer to Zionism*: “If the Israelis are not to be caught in a bloody trap of Zionist devising, they will have to abandon the exclusive and aggressive Jewish state and opt for a Middle East federation of the Arab and Jewish peoples.”

While the branding of anti-Zionism as antisemitism is an outrageous smear, socialists must acknowledge that an abhor-



*Daily humiliation for Palestinians by check points, arbitrary detention and confiscation of land.*

rence of Israel's Zionist behavior can slip into actual Jew hatred. This is something Zionists are doing their best to promote by equating Jewish identity with the self-proclaimed "Jewish nation-state." Their goal is to make the public think that to be Jewish is to support the crimes of the Israeli state and especially the current killing campaign in Gaza and the West Bank.

Of course, Jew hatred anywhere must be aggressively opposed. If individuals or groups infiltrate pro-Palestinian activities with signs, memes, or chants like "Gas the Jews" or "The Jews Had It Coming," we should categorically ban them — and remove them by force, if necessary. Holocaust-deniers, even ones who claim to be Jewish, should be cordoned off.

The false argument that Jews control U.S. government policy is a standard trope of white supremacists' conspiracy theory and must be intellectually defeated. The United States has its own reasons for wanting an imperialist outpost in the region and would abandon Israel if a better option appeared.

When choosing a site for protest, there should be an effort to select ones that the public can understand as clearly tied to the Israeli state, such as the many embassies and consulates across the U.S.; one should not give the false impression that Jews per se are the target. One may think one has good reasons for an action against a pro-Zionist individual or business, but the result can be a very bad look when the national climate is so hostile and demagogic politicians are everywhere.

Nevertheless, the basis of Left unity during the invasion and bombing of Gaza ought to be to permanently stop Israel's onslaught, reaching out to as many people as possible to build mass action. Personally, I dislike acceding to any demands of the pro-Israel partisans and am dubious about their dictating various political litmus tests for what language is acceptable on petitions and protest letters, when just about every sharp criticism is declared to be "demonization of Israel."

While everyone's situation is different, depending on their political community, it seems to me that characterizing Israeli policies as "genocide" (as defined by the United Nations in

1948) is appropriate, even if it raises hackles. On the other hand, anything suggestive of political support for Hamas would, for me, be out of the question, even as explicit condemnations of Hamas may not be necessary depending on the purpose of the statement.

## **A Necessary Entire Reconstruction**

Finally, we might consider the fate of Thrall's admirable *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama*. Would minds be changed if pro-Israel supporters could just see more of what the Palestinian reality is all about?

Although his book began to receive laudable reviews in several nationally respected publications, this attention dwindled after October 7 and at least a quarter of his scheduled public appearances and readings in London, New York, Los Angeles, and Washington were cancelled.

Ads were pulled for the book, and Thrall felt forced to withdraw from at least one university-sponsored event when it was demanded that he sign a pledge opposing any boycotts of Israel. Even though his effort shows that another approach to this controversy is possible, one without invective, harsh denunciations of Zionism, references to settler-colonialism or genocide, activists may still be justified in wondering if it can really make any difference.

In the end, activists must focus on building a social movement that can move us forward. Independent of the question of state forms that can be devised, both the Palestinian and Israeli populations are there to stay and significantly intertwined.

So resolving the conflict in a lasting manner demands a transferal of perspective to some qualitatively new plan: whether two states (one Palestinian, one Jewish), one state (democratic and secular), or some sort of federation (with culturally autonomous regions), as long as Palestinians achieve self-determination and are no longer the stateless dependents of a hostile state power.

Peace and security for all is the goal, but these can't come with the retention of Israeli colonial privilege, something that some liberal Zionists and two-staters seem loathe to acknowledge. Nevertheless, the Jewish population of Israel must be reached and won over on the grounds that equality is sounder for all; the Israeli-Jewish population cannot be coupled with its ruling group any more than can Palestinians be coupled with Hamas.

It won't be easy, but an effort must be made to split the Israeli majority from its militaristic government and the present form of Zionist ideology. Simultaneously, a campaign for democratic revolution in the numerous dictatorships in the Middle East is also vital to the process.

As Martin Luther King pointed out in relation to the still-relevant U.S. civil rights movement, there are situations where a more dramatic transformation is required.

*"For years I labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions of the South, a little change here, a little change there," King told the journalist David Halberstam in April 1967. "Now I feel quite differently. I think you've got to have a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values."*

We need a post-Zionist world so that there can be a post-Hamas, fully liberated Palestinian population. "Never Again — for Anyone!" should be the watchword. ■

## When the Tactic Drives the Strategy

# AOC's Journey to the Center of Politics

By Kim Moody

WITH MOST OF the socialist and left progressives in the House of Representatives endorsing the centrist leadership of the Democratic Caucus and Joe Biden's bid for re-election, the project inspired largely by Bernie Sanders' 2021 run for the presidency that was to transform the Democratic Party appears to have hit the wall of establishment resistance and dissident adaptation.

Not surprisingly, the records of these radicals have come under closer examination, none more so than that of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. AOC is of course the most visible and widely publicized of this generation of electoral rebels who compose the Squad and its progressive allies in Congress.

A battle of the balance sheets has broken out as critics and supporters attempt to assess whether or not AOC and other Squad members have adapted to the norms of the Democratic Party center, its leadership, and the legislative "framework" of the Biden administration. I will argue, however, that this balance sheet of good-versus-bad acts fails to grasp the power relations and processes that push "elected" leftists toward the political and operational center of the Democratic Party.

A recent example of this balance sheet approach is blogger and academic Freddie DeBoer's *New York Magazine* article "AOC Is Just a Regular Old Democrat Now" (July, 2023). DeBoer's criticisms of AOC point with justification to her well-known transgressions of socialist principle and high-visibility missteps, notably: voting "present" rather than "no" on the 2021 Iron Dome gift to Israel; attending the Metropolitan Museum of Art's incredibly elite 2021 "Gala" albeit in the famous "Tax the Rich" gown; voting "yes" on Biden's railroad strike ban and imposed tentative agreement in 2022.

I would add the softening of her criticism of Biden's immigration policy which she simply calls "weak," and as *New York Times* interviewer Lulu Garcia-Navarro (August 30, 2023) tried repeatedly to get a straight answer on, failing to visit the border once elected.

These are all valid criticisms. For DeBoer, however, there is no positive side on AOC's balance sheet of political behavior. DeBoer's explanation for this comes from what he says AOC's defenders tell him:

*"I'm constantly told that the problem lies in expecting anything from her at all. Hey, she's just one congresswoman! She's hemmed*

*in by her party and an undemocratic system."*

In fact, AOC and other Squad members have not been AWOL in the House for all this time. Aside even from the well-known political faux pas, they have like their more conventional colleagues introduced dozens of bills, amendments and resolutions, which after all is what you do there. Most call for good things, a few have even been voted up by the House.

The problem lies not in the inability to do anything, but in the dynamic that degrades what is possible from any radical comprehensive program, such as the Green New Deal or Medicare-For-All, to increasingly piecemeal reforms that fail to address the massive problems facing humanity in a comprehensive fashion that one would expect from socialists.

*Jacobin* staff writer Branko Marcetic has answered DeBoer's critique by listing AOC's progressive accomplishments as he counted them (*Jacobin*, August 16, 2023). The list includes some significant victories within the House — although, as is often the case, most never made it into law.

A notable example is AOC's 2020 effort to repeal the Faircloth Amendment to the 1937 Housing Act, which limits the construction of public housing. Clearly, this would have been a breakthrough. As Marcetic points out this passed the House in 2020 during her first term. It failed to become law in the 116th Congress, however, and her effort to reintroduce the repeal in 2021 in the 117th went nowhere.

Marcetic provides numerous other examples, most of which faced a similar fate. Assuming that effort counts, Marcetic scores a point for AOC's good deeds while underplaying her misdeeds and the ultimate fate of most of her efforts.

Both these analyses are based on a balance sheet approach to political assessment. In DeBoer's case, the positive side for AOC is zero, while for Marcetic, by my count of the actual legislation he lists, successful or not, the balance is more like 14 "good" against a few well-known "bad" moves.

The problem with the balance sheet approach, however, is that it lacks assessment of trajectory, context or process. Thus Marcetic doesn't seem to notice that of the 14 or so actual legislative accomplishments he lists, 10 were made in AOC's first term, only three in the second term, and one amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of 2023 in the current 118th Congress.

Beyond the simple numbers is the question of the political trajectory of AOC's proposals and accomplishments. In his balance sheet, Marcetic does not mention that the scale and ambition of her legislative proposals moved from comprehensive and potentially transformative, as in the Green New Deal or even the repeal of the Faircloth Amendment, to mostly marginal and piecemeal proposals.

In other words, the problem isn't just obvious mistakes or

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AOC, about to join environmental activists in sitting in at Nancy Pelosi's office in 2018, shortly after her first election. AP Photo

bad votes, but the *direction* of activity. Not including the routine re-introduction of the Green New Deal resolution, in the 118th Congress, as of November 2023, according to Congress.gov, AOC had introduced only three bills, which remain stuck in committees, and three amendments all of which failed, the smallest number by this time in a session.

As to process, DeBoer says: “the macro situation is this: Establishment Democrats and their liberal media mouthpieces expect total electoral loyalty from leftists while offering us little in return.” This is a description of Democratic leadership hopes perhaps, but not much analysis of how loyalty, whether total or conditional, is actually achieved.

For one thing, Squad members do issue unwanted proposals and dissents from longtime Democratic policies. This has been particularly evident with the opposition of most Squad members to the party's unconditional support for Israel.

For another, even rebels like AOC get the occasional reward for good behavior; for example, co-chair with John Kerry of Biden's 2020, albeit toothless climate change campaign panel — or elevation to a “ranking” member of the House Oversight Committee. These are signs of the Democrats' traditional carrot and stick approach to incorporating would-be radicals.

Marcetic, who has written much about the limits of Democratic neoliberalism and the Biden administration's adherence to capital's preferences, nonetheless says nothing about process. Instead, he blames the crisis of major left electoral organizations like the Justice Democrats on the “left pessimism” of those who focus too much on the bad side of AOC's balance sheet.

## The Vortex of Wealth, Power & Hierarchy

The resistance of Democratic Party leaders, politicians, funders, consultants and so on to large comprehensive proposals to reign in the autonomy of capital, and confiscate significant portions of current and accumulated profits and wealth, is rooted in the party's historic, contemporary, multiple and complex connections to and dependence on the wealth of various sectors of capital — as well as on the unspoken assumption

that “the system,” whatever its flaws, is the only viable one and that its health depends on that of “private enterprise.”

This does not mean the impossibility of reform in general or even of “big ticket” programs like Biden's Build Back Better infrastructure and climate agenda, in which much of the apparent spending is offset by a long timeframe for implementation (10 years) and direct payments and tax credits to the private firms that do the actual work.

Rather, it is a recognized contradiction that poses limits to comprehensive change under the best of circumstances, which become only more severe under the conditions of slow growth and low productivity since the Great Recession.

Much of the argument from the left that favors “tactically contesting partisan elections on the Democratic ballot line”, as the Democratic Socialists of America's 2023 convention resolution puts it, however, denies or simply ignores any analysis of this context and the structural reality of the Democratic Party itself.

Yet volumes of studies from mainstream academics to left analysts, as well as constant reporting from multiple media sources, reveal a party that has become a well-organized, financed, and staffed multi-layered hierarchy of organizations whose budgets run in the hundreds of millions with a huge proportion of that funding coming from capital and the wealthy.<sup>1</sup>

This is a cheap investment for capital compared to radical and expensive reforms such as Medicare-For-All or guaranteed jobs for all. While most leftists usually understand the impact of corporate power and lobbying on Congress generally, the advocates of the Democratic path to office fail to appreciate that these same forces are also at work *inside* the multi-layered hierarchy of the party's national and state organizations, legislative caucuses, and campaign committees such as the House-based Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC, pronounced “D-triple C”).

The first engagement with all of this for candidates newly elected to the House of Representatives is with the Democratic Caucus, whose leaders organize the House committees and control the party's involvement in the legislative process.

The Democratic Caucus is a well-structured and staffed hierarchy with a dozen “whips,” most of whose members rely on wealthy donors and costly political consultants to win and hold office. Its powerful leadership is elected by the Caucus members, but there is seldom doubt that the party's political center will dominate.

Here is how a major *Congressional Quarterly* textbook describes the party organization in Congress:

“Today's Congress is a mature institution characterized by complex internal structures and procedures. It is led by a well-defined party apparatus, with each party organized according to its established rules and headed by a hierarchy of leaders and whips, elected and appointed. Party organization extends to policy committees, campaign committees, research committees, and numerous task forces. Minority and majority party leaders command considerable

budget and staff resources. Taken together they employ some four hundred staff aides, and various party committees employ about an equal number.”<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the Caucus is not a monolith and contains a certain range of opinion. Economic, social, climate, pandemic and other conditions change and sometimes impose themselves even on Congress. Disagreements arise, and some shifts in policy become necessary. The pressures on dissident members from Caucus leaders, along with their control over committee appointments and the legislative process, are nevertheless real, and in today’s polarized Congress with its narrow party majorities the pressures demanding party “unity” are intense.

As FiveThirtyEight’s tracking of House votes show, in 2022 Democratic members voted by over ninety percent with the president, including the Squad, reaching the highest level in 50 years. Squad scores were above ninety percent and only slightly below the Caucus norm, due almost entirely to negative votes on a handful of defense and police spending proposals.<sup>3</sup>

The result is not so much “total loyalty” as DeBoer suggests, but an *operational loyalty* that allows dissidents to say whatever they wish (within reason) and even vote “nay” particularly when it doesn’t matter, as with defense and police appropriations that are certain to pass, so long as they do what is needed to get the presidents’ and the Caucus’s major goals through the legislative meatgrinder.

This is the context in which elected socialists and genuine left progressives find themselves in today’s Congress when they “tactically” enter political office via the Democratic ballot line. There is nothing “hollowed-out” about the Democratic Caucus or the well-funded and staffed Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee that plays a major role in selecting, backing, and directing funds to favored House candidates.

**A**OC herself realized this toward the end of her first term when she told *The Intercept* (December 16, 2020), that the problem was not just the “two personalities” leading the party in the House and Senate, but “the structural shifts in power in the House both in process and rule to concentrate power in party leadership, of both parties, frankly, but in the Democratic Party leadership to such a degree that an individual member has far less power than they did 30, 40, 50 years ago.”<sup>4</sup>

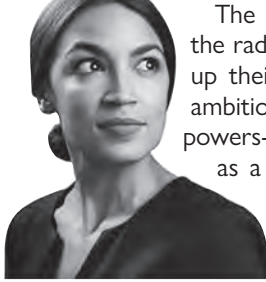
Tactics, of course, are supposed to be driven by strategy. For most of those socialists who argue in favor of taking office via the Democratic ballot line the “strategy” is to transform or at least push the Democratic Party to the left.

As Abbott and Guastella, who favor using the Democratic Party ballot line, nevertheless argued in 2019, the nature of the party along with dependence on money “compound to effectively induce even the most progressive candidates “upward” and rightward — that is closer to the party leadership and toward the center politically.”<sup>5</sup>

It is the radicals that are transformed in practice, not the party. It is *the tactic that drives the strategy*, not the other way around. Along this journey to the political center, not only are their once transformative and radical policy goals abandoned in practice for piecemeal reforms, but the very means with which to fight for change are themselves modified or dropped almost from the start.

This isn’t a matter of personal character flaws as DeBoer often implies, nor is it simply the old saw about legislative

compromise, trade-offs, log-rolling, etc. It is a process of socialization to the norms of the real context that election as a Democrat entails. The party Caucus, after all, exists not only to make day-to-day legislative decisions, but precisely to produce “unity,” that is conformity, in practice.



The process is sometimes opaque because the radical politicians are not required to give up their ideology or formally abandon their ambitious goals, or cease condemning the powers-that-be. It is advertised and excused as a process of “learning” and “maturing,”

words AOC has used to describe her development, as yesterday’s critics of the neoliberal leadership become today’s partners and the old radical program is quietly disassembled into small, piecemeal proposals and routine defeats.

### Organization & Opposition or Adaptation?

If the goal of taking office as a Democrat is to transform the party or drive it significantly to the left in terms of policy and legislation, one would expect the socialists and left progressives to act as an organized left opposition to the centrist leadership of the party.

This never happened. Any notion of radical confrontation was quickly discarded after AOC’s one-time sit-in in Nancy Pelosi’s office with the Sunrise Movement in favor of the Green New Deal. Although AOC introduced it in each new Congress, the Green New Deal resolution has been allowed to die in silence without a fight in the eleven committees to which it is referred.

Similarly, the idea of forcing a floor vote on Medicare-For-All by threatening an organized withholding of support for Pelosi’s re-election as party leader in 2020 was opposed by AOC and dropped.<sup>6</sup>

As early as 2019 AOC explained how she had gone through a “loss of innocence and naïveté.” The first signs of AOC’s adaptation to a more “collegial” approach to the party was the mainstreaming of her own staff organization with the replacement of the more outspoken radical chief of staff Saikat Chakrabarti with mainstreamer and former Kamala Harris aide Airel Eckblad.

This was done soon after Hakeem Jeffries, by then chair of the Democratic Caucus, sent “a biting warning shot tweet”, later deleted, about Chakrabarti, according to *The New York Times* (September 18, 2019, Updated April 17, 2020). She also fired Corbin Trent who argued that she should advocate for a fully universal healthcare system like that in Britain. In his place came another mainstream professional hired gun, Lauren Hitt, who had worked for Beto O’Rourke among others.

A fight for the Green New Deal or Medicare-For-All would require organization — both mobilization outside of Congress and an organized caucus or voting bloc inside — not just the largely ceremonial lining up of “co-sponsors.” As to any independent organization within the House, *Politico* (March 30, 2020) reported that AOC’s idea for a “Corporate-Free” Caucus analogous to the confrontational Republican Freedom Caucus was dropped early-on.

While the four politically left women of color elected in 2018 soon became known as “the Squad,” that label remains a “brand” rather than a caucus or voting bloc. Although they

are obviously like-minded and often vote the same way and no doubt compare notes, they have never acted as a bloc.

They made this clear from the start during a 2019 interview by CBS's Gayle King, as reported in *Current Affairs* (May/June 2023) and viewed online by this author, the Squad-four asserted that they did not act as a political bloc. As Ayanna Pressley put it, "There is no insurgency...There is nothing [conspiratorial]...We take those votes alone."

Instead, they chose the conventional path of joining the Congressional Progressive Caucus (CPC), itself a nonconfrontational and politically contradictory group whose chair Pramila Jayapal, insists, "We do not want to be compared to the (Republican) Freedom Caucus."

Furthermore, as one former congressional aide and current Georgetown academic described the CPC's limits to FiveThirtyEight (September 29, 2021), "The progressive caucus has never really wanted to take the next step and fight stuff on the floor. They work within the system." That was certainly the case with Medicare-For-All in 2022 when it finally came to a hearing in the Oversight Committee, but nothing more.

Nor is the Congressional Progressive Caucus ideologically consistent. Twenty percent of its current 103 members also belong to the centrist New Democrat Coalition, almost three times the proportion of the expanded Squad.

**T**he lack of an organized left opposition and the pressures for conformity from leaders and members of the Caucus are further underlined by the fact that AOC and the others have never actually opposed the centrist leadership of the Democratic Caucus. On the contrary, they have consistently endorsed and voted for it.

While AOC was frequently quoted in 2019 and 2020 as believing that Speaker Nancy Pelosi should "go," she argued there was no alternative and urged a vote for Pelosi in the leadership elections in both the 116th and 117th Congresses. Votes on the Caucus leadership are not symbolic acts, but endorsements of the leaders' political direction. She could easily have abstained.

This endorsement of the centrist leadership was compounded when AOC along with the other Squad associates joined the unanimous Caucus vote to crown Hakeem Jeffries successor to Pelosi as party and minority leader in the current 118th Congress. Jeffries is not only a hardcore centrist and understudy of Pelosi's but an avowed anti-socialist. As I have reported elsewhere, in concert with Pelosi and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Jeffries played a highly active role in opposing progressive primary challenges in the 2022 midterm elections.<sup>7</sup>

Along with the earlier decisions not to oppose the leadership, backing Jeffries was a choice to take the age-old alternative route of permeation — working within the political parameters of the "establishment" in the hope of having an impact through acceptance by the center of power.

Perhaps the most strategically contradictory sign of accommodation was AOC's retreat from supporting the aggressive "primarying" of centrist incumbents in the House.

Challenging Democratic incumbents is, of course, frowned upon by the Caucus and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC). Nevertheless, this reluctance is particularly incomprehensible for someone who wants to change the Democratic Party, because there is no other way

within the party to clear out the huge centrist and stand-pat incumbent majority of Democratic officeholders in the House and elsewhere.

The rate at which House incumbents win remained high at 94 percent as of 2022, and retirements and open seat contests are too few to provide a pathway to anything like a sizable presence in the Caucus, let alone in the House or Senate, or any state legislature for decades to come.

AOC had once hinted she might challenge Hakeem Jeffries in his nearby Brooklyn district, but this was never pursued. Her reluctance to support other left progressive primary challenges to centrist incumbents in the House, however, first appeared in practice when AOC refrained from endorsing Cori Bush in 2020. She had supported Bush in 2018 when they were both running for the first time and Bush lost, but in 2020 she declined to do so.

In fact, she endorsed only three of the eight candidates backed by the Justice Democrats (JD), the group that helped AOC win in 2018, who were challenging moderate or conservative incumbents. The three were Marie Newman in Illinois, Jessica Cisneros in Texas, both opposing anti-abortion incumbents on the far right of the party, and fellow (now former) DSAer Jamaal Bowman, the only candidate for possible Squad branding and the only one she supported who opposed a mainstream centrist incumbent.

The leadership PAC "Courage to Change" set-up by AOC in 2019 contributed to Newman and Cisneros, but otherwise focused on Republican-held seats, open seat contests, and general elections according to *Politico* (March 30, 2020) and *Rolling Stone* (February 21, 2020).

In 2022 AOC actually endorsed three candidates for the U.S. Senate and a full slate of thirteen candidates for New York State offices as well as Squad incumbents, but only three out of the eight left progressives endorsed by Bernie Sanders, Justice Democrats, and/or Our Revolution who were challenging incumbents in House midterm contests, according to FiveThirtyEight (September 27, 2023; CNN, June 7, 2022).

These were Cisneros, Nida Allam, a former Sanders' campaign aide, and at the very last minute when it was too late to prevent her defeat, former Our Revolution chair Nina Turner. The party leadership turned its fire on Cisneros and Turner, who lost as did Allam. In 2022, AOC also endorsed Alessandra Biaggi, against Sean Maloney. But Biaggi, a former Hillary Clinton aid and assistant general council to Governor Andrew Cuomo, is not a left progressive and was not endorsed by Sanders, JD, or Our Revolution.

Following party protocol, AOC's leadership PAC also contributed small amounts to 41 candidates mostly for general elections. This included 18 members of the centrist New Democrat Coalition and even a couple of conservative Blue Dogs. Clearly, AOC's inconsistent and cautious approach to challenging incumbent centrists in the House is incompatible with any strategy for transforming or moving the Democratic Party.

Despite a significant number of open House seats in the 2022 Midterms, the net gains for left progressives were small. Of the 23 left candidates defined as those endorsed by either Bernie Sanders, Justice Democrats and/or Our Revolution, ten won their primary. Of the eight who challenged incumbents only one (Jamie McLoed Skinner) won, and she lost the general

election.

Of the 15 who fought open seat primary contests, nine succeeded. This was down significantly from 2020 when left progressives won 22 out of 32 open seats, according to FiveThirtyEight (September 27, 2022). Altogether in 2022, 10 won and 13 lost their primaries. But three sitting left progressives as defined above lost to moderates in incumbent-versus-incumbent primary fights in redrawn districts, and three new challengers who won their primaries were defeated in the general election.

The net gain for 2022 was just four, none of whom won a primary challenge to a sitting incumbent.<sup>8</sup> It seems that the state-run primary is not as permeable a “tactic” as some would have it.

## Counter-Offensive & Dead End Ahead

Prospects for the electoral left in 2024 are, if anything, significantly worse at the national level with the pressure intensifying to support moderates in swing districts and not rock the boat. Furthermore, several of the major left election campaign organizations, including Justice Democrats, face a financial crisis as small donations have shrunk and the costs of elections continue to soar.

The combined pressure for “unity” in the face of possible Republican advances or even the presidency in 2024, together with the financial crunch, have led the major left individual and organizational endorsers — Our Revolution, Justice Democrats, Bernie Sanders, and AOC — to refrain from endorsing or supporting challenges to incumbent Democrats as the election season heats up.

Even endorsements of state legislative candidates have been few so far. While this could change, any concerted advance by the electoral left seems highly unlikely in 2024. Indeed, a “counter-offensive” against left challengers and even incumbents was to be expected. Democratic groups like the Moderate PAC, for example, announced plans to raise \$20 million to defend centrists against leftists as early as January 2023.

The Israel-Gaza war, moreover, has brought an acceleration of challenges to sitting left-wing and progressive House members critical of Israel’s disproportionate and remorseless bombing of Gaza that has taken over 15,000 lives, even when they denounced Hamas’ October 7 attack, which took 1200 Israeli lives.

Unconditional support for Israel is a longstanding core principle of Democratic Party foreign policy. It was always waiting to be a problem for those expressing sympathy or support for the Palestinian people. The outbreak (renewal) of the war with Hamas, and the subsequent refusal of nine Democrats to vote for a resolution funding and uncritically supporting Israel’s massive bombing, has brought renewed opposition to Squad members and others who have called for a ceasefire.

As reports from *Politico* (November 12, 2023), the *New York Times* (October 29, 2023; November 17, 2023), the *Washington Post* (November 1, 2023), and Associated Press (November 4, 2023) reveal, all original Squad members plus Cori Bush, Jamaal Bowman, and Summer Lee already face serious challengers in the 2024 Democratic primaries.

Ilhan Omar and Summer Lee, who narrowly won their 2022 primaries, are particularly vulnerable, but all will face renewed opposition. Key to this is the generous financing of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC),

which receives big contributions from both Democratic and Republican wealthy donors.

AIPAC-allied Democratic Majority for Israel (DMI) has already begun running attack ads against Rashida Tlaib, Jamaal Bowman, and Summer Lee. Altogether, according to Slate, AIPAC is expected to spend \$100 million to eliminate Squad and other pro-Palestinian House members.<sup>9</sup>

Already facing attack ads from AIPAC and DMI in the primaries, leaders of the Progressive Caucus met with party leader Jeffries on November 9, demanding that he act to “keep the influential American Israel Public Affairs Committee out of Democratic primaries,” *Politico* reported (November 16, 2023). As *Politico* also noted, AIPAC is “a group that he still has close ties to.”<sup>10</sup>



*AOC and Bernie have been associated with a transformative plan, but it has been stalled.*

Traditionally, the formal organizations of the party support its sitting members, and Jeffries has personally endorsed Ilhan Omar and promised to back all incumbents. Calling off AIPAC, however, is another matter. In reference to AIPAC’s primary interventions, Jeffries

recently remarked “Outside groups are gonna do what outside groups are gonna do.”<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Jeffries has a record of combatting left challengers. In 2022 he used the allegedly independent, corporate-funded Team Blue PAC, which he co-chaired with Blue Dog Josh Gottheimer, alongside of AIPAC, to actively oppose left candidates in the primaries, including Nina Turner, Jessica Cisnero, and Summer Lee. Appealing to Jeffries for real protection in the primary is an act of desperation.

Coming in the wake of lost momentum since 2020, the financial crisis of progressive electoral organizations, the accelerating attack on Squad members and other left progressives on top of their own failure to gain real influence by adapting to the party’s political and power center, have together brought the electoral left to a standstill.

The institutional weight of the Democratic Party, with its national and state organizations, legislative caucuses (or conferences), campaign committees, wealthy ruling class backers, and costly consultants along with the pressures to conform in practice that these bring, inevitably negate any use of the Democratic ballot line as a “tactical” step to political transformation or independent organization.

The primary election on the Democratic ballot line is the gateway to this hierarchical institutional complex, not the path to a political and organizational opportunity or opening. For socialists, it is a dead end. ■

### Notes

1. For a detailed analysis of how the Democratic Party actually functions in the primaries see Kim Moody, “The ‘Class Ceiling’: Political Money and the Primary Election” *Spectre* Issue 6, Fall 2022, 34-55.
2. Roger H. Davidson, et al., *Congress and Its Members*, 17th Edition (Thousand Oaks CA: SAGE/CQPress, 2020), 26.
3. FiveThirtyEight, “Does Your Member of Congress Vote With Or Against Biden?”, January 3, 2023, <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/biden-congress-votes/house/>; Niele Lesniewski and Ryan Kelly, “2022 Vote Study: Division hit new high in Senate, fell in House,” Roll Call, March 24, 2023, <https://rollcall.com/2023/03/24/2022-vote->

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4. Jeremy Scahill, "AOC On Ending The Pelosi Era, Biden's Corporate Cabinet, And The Battle For Medicare For All," Interview, *The Intercept*, December 16, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/12/16/intercepted-aoc-pelosi-biden-cabinet/>
  5. Jared Abbott and Dustin Guastella, "A Socialist Party in Our Time?," *Catalyst* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2019), 33.
  6. Lily Sánchez, "How AOC Went From Influencer to Influenced," *Current Affairs*, May/June 2023, <https://www.currentaffairs.org/2023/07/how-aoc-went-from-influencer-to-influenced/>
  7. Kim Moody, "Stuck in the Mud, Sinking to the Right: 2022 Midterm Elections," *Against the Current* 223 (March/April 2023), 23-28.
  8. Moody, "Stuck in the Mud," 25.
  9. Alecander Sammon, "The Squad Is About to Fight for Its political Life," *Slate*, November 15, 2-023, [https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2023/11/squad-primary-](https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2023/11/squad-primary-battle-israel-gaza-pacs.html)

- [battle-israel-gaza-pacs.html](https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2023/11/squad-primary-battle-israel-gaza-pacs.html)
10. In a meeting a week or so after October 7, between Congressional leaders and major Pro-Israel organizations, including AIPAC, Democratic party leaders pledged complete support to Israel's indiscriminate and disproportionate retaliation and promised to increase financial and military aid. Not to be outdone in his show of unconditional sycophancy, Hakeem Jeffries called for "removal of Hamas from the earth." He cited as precedent the Torah in which God rains down the flood that spares the righteous Noah but "eradicates" evil from the world. The flood, of course, also eradicated much of life on earth, hence the ark to save Noah. Nevertheless, Jeffries went on to say, "These verses remind us of the role that Israel must now play in eradicating evil," according to the Jewish Telegraph Agency, October 17, 2023. He did note that international law is supposed to protect Palestinian civilians, but that "this is a moment of accountability and Hamas will be washed away." Floods don't discriminate in who they "wash away," neither do relentless bombings. No liberal "snow flake" is Representative Jeffries.
  11. Sammon, "The Squad," November 15, 2023.

## A Joint Israeli-U.S. Genocide — continued from page 12

the Gaza Strip.

"The second miscalculation consisted in the exercise of wishful thinking and the expectation of divine miracles, along the religious logic that characterizes the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and the political current to which it belongs. This translated in the belief that Operation Al-Aqsa Flood would unleash a general war on the State of Israel in which all Palestinians wherever they are, as well as all Arabs and Muslims would take part."

Achcar goes on to quote the October 7 proclamation by Muhammad al-Deif, the commander-in-chief of the armed wing of Hamas, notable for its delusional, messianic and frankly sadistic character.

The notion that Iran or its regional client regimes in Syria and Lebanon would go to war against Israel ignored the elementary fact that the Iranian rulers are propelled by the same overriding imperative as Israel's governing coalition: *regime self-preservation*. Iran essentially has told Hamas that "you didn't tell us you would do this, so you're on your own."

For Iran, the regime's "support" for Palestine remains verbal. For Netanyahu's governing Israeli coalition, its preservation means genocidal war without limit or end point. It is possible, even if unlikely, that the scale and duration of the carnage in Gaza might impel Iran's client Hezbollah militia in Lebanon into a large-scale retaliation, touching off a firestorm of escalation that no state actor intends.

It's also necessary to confront the revelations of the rapes and sexual torture perpetrated by Hamas among its atrocities of October 7. It might be tempting to attribute these accounts to Israeli state propaganda, which notoriously lies about *everything* — especially the monstrous claim that it seeks to "minimize" civilian deaths in Gaza, dutifully echoed by the U.S. State Department which knows it's a giant falsehood.

But following that understandable instinct would be tragic blindness in the present instance. We are dealing here not with Israeli state PR but with survivors' direct accounts, journalists' reports, and documentation by organizations in Israel with track records in

establishing rape crisis centers and dealing with the high levels of domestic and misogynist violence in that society.

While Israel's political and military apparatus — of course — will exploit these facts of sexual brutality to the fullest, supporters of Palestinian freedom can under no circumstances ignore them. If nothing else, they should discredit any image of Hamas as a liberatory or progressive organization. More than that, they are consistent with the larger picture of the organization's methods and ideology, leading Palestine toward a dead end and ever-deepening tragedy.

### Delusion All Around

The second dynamic, more broadly, is how miscalculations by multiple parties including "great" powers have contributed to a gathering apocalypse. While Hamas' fatal delusion has dragged Gaza's people into a suicide mission that they never chose, it's within a far bigger matrix of miscalculations and fantasies by bigger players.

Ten days before October 7, U.S. strategy was based on the premise that "the Middle East hasn't been so quiet anytime in the past 20 years." Israel's rapidly proceeding "normalization of relations" with Saudi Arabia and repressive oil kingdoms would sideline Palestine into a corner where it could be safely ignored.

Israel's military and intelligence apparatus complacently ignored their own on-the-ground observers' warnings of Hamas' preparation for a serious military operation. Those alarms just didn't fit the prevailing "conception" that Hamas was tamed and deterred by Israeli power and the needs of governing Gaza.

October 7 shattered that security myth. But one illusion is replaced by a deadlier one, that the present all-out war will not only crush Hamas but somehow rescue the hostages and make Gaza "safe" — depending on which Israeli official or politician or general may be speaking — either for some new, puppet Palestinian rule, or for military incursions at times of Israel's choosing, or maybe the depopulation and Israeli re-colonization of Gaza. Choose your pipe dream.

As usual, it's *United States' delusions* that are biggest and most dangerous. In the immediate wake of October 7, the Biden administration saw the opportunity for political "victory" by making a full public embrace of Netanyahu while urging behind-the-scenes that Israel hold back from full-scale invasion and genocidal massacre. The response is exactly what we've seen: Israel pulverizing Gaza with its full arsenal, including the two- and five-thousand-pound bombs that the United States generously provides.

The prospect of Israeli "victory" has become a global political disaster for the United States. Not only its pretext of caring about Palestine, but also the notion that it can curb the violent excesses of its strategic Israeli partner with a bit of gentle diplomatic pressure, have been exposed.

Only a very explicit, open and almost unprecedented U.S. veto of Israel's war and ethnic cleansing rampage can stop it now. Presently, this seems hardly likely — especially in the fractured state of U.S. politics, with much of the Democrats' voter base increasingly angry and alienated from pro-Israel policies while the Republican Party functions as a foaming-at-the-mouth genocidal Amen Corner for Netanyahu.

At the very same time that U.S. policy and the right wing abets Israel's destruction of Palestine, Ukraine is about to be starved of the weapons it desperately needs to defeat Putin's annexationist invasion.

Given the rage of the Arab American community and many Democratic voting constituencies over U.S. complicity in the genocide, it is entirely possible that when Netanyahu goes down following this war, he will take Biden with him. In comparison to the unfathomable human toll in Gaza and the gathering settler-military ethnic cleansing in the West Bank, this would hardly be the greatest collateral damage from the post-October 7 holocaust. But its implications for U.S. politics have their own significance.

What's needed more than ever now is maximum pressure on the complicit war criminals in Washington DC to force a renewed and permanent ceasefire. **Ceasefire Now — Stop the Genocide! ■**

## Unprecedented Times, or Media Narrative: Looking Toward 2024

By Harvey J. Graff

AS WE CONTEMPLATE the 2024 election cycle, the present moment — or more broadly the past seven to ten years — marks an *unprecedented* period in American history. But it's not for the usually repeated reasons.

None of the major factors is fundamentally or completely novel. Rather, the challenge and the significance of our times lay in the *conjunction* of a number of elements.

Together these do make a unique challenge, *symptoms* of which include uncertainties over whether the 2024 election will be conducted peacefully, the results will be accepted, whether a potential convicted felon may be nominated and elected President of the United States — and possible prospects of a fundamental Constitutional and legitimacy crisis.

Conflicting assertions that “*we live in unprecedented times*” surround us. How unprecedented is the looming election? In my historian's alternative construction, I do see our times as “unprecedented” but a result of complicated, contradictory historical relationships.

On one hand, *almost none* of the major factors are essentially new. Notable of course are the always viciously racialized character of electoral politics, along with the pervasive dominant power of corporate greed — the latter of which, however, now becomes especially deadly at a time of escalating climate disaster.

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Despite legislation and court rulings, the gun, drug, and gas and oil industries control legislators and executives at all levels of government. Reforms are far too modest.

On the other hand, the challenge to our understanding and strategic choices of responses lies in identifying and tracing those elements, larger and smaller, short- and long-term, that do uniquely confront the American experiences, and the young and old. They permeate many spheres of our lives but come together in challenging yet revealing ways.

To make sense of the relationships of precedent *and* novelty, patterns of continuing development *and* rupture from the recognized past, we must accept complexity and contradiction. Simplification is a certain path to distortion and miscomprehension. National politics *illustrate this well*.

### Pronouncement and Reality

The uncontrolled pronouncements are contradictory. We are simultaneously in “*uncharted territory*” and on *the verge of another civil, world, or race war*. Population growth lags but the U.S. is invaded with “aliens.” We learn that we face the rise of fascism but *without* Hitler, National Socialism, the scapegoating of Jews, or the political economy of Germany in the 1920s.

We confront unprecedented inflation, we are told, when in fact today's rates are nothing new. At the same time, unemployment declines at the same time that rates of leaving the workforce increase (all based on non-comparable data and only within 20 or 40 years).

The United States, we hear, is falling and rising simultaneously. Liberty and equality are simultaneously labeled as too limited and too great. And of course, the inability to read the Second Amendment and its case law leads to claims that unregulated multiple guns per person with no limitations somehow make us safer. The repetitive claims ring in self-caricature and sometimes deadly self-parody.

What is *unprecedented today first*, most glaringly since 2020 but growing from the 1990s, is the effectiveness of highly organized, well-funded right-wing social-media savvy campaigns of dis- and misinformation. They are funded to an unprecedented degree by under-the-cover “soft and dark money” from

billionaires whose overt, public role in all spheres of life is also unprecedented. The far-right majority Supreme Court facilitates this.

Among the most active are the Koch Brothers, Heritage PAC, Bradley Foundation, Robert Gates, and Peter Thiel. This is amplified by ALEC (American Legislative Exchange Council) along with self-admittedly dishonest and fabricated statements by fake journalists like Christopher Rufo, and right-wing academics, lawyers, and politicians.

Inextricably interrelated is the loudly effective, high-volume echo chamber across electronic media of all kinds. They are unusually well aimed at confused and fearful, overwhelmingly white persons. Failings in education at all levels are a contributing cause *and* consequence.

Traditionally conservative people are bombarded with messages that they are a threatened, diminishing minority, out-reproduced by people of color and immigrants, liberals and undefined, unidentified leftists, constituting new majorities rooted in their *differences*. What was heralded as a partial achievement of one or another American Dream, many now see as its end.

As a comparative social historian, I reject the ahistorical, dramatically simplified framing of *either* or *both* “precedentedness” or lack of precedents. “*Precedent*” is a historical judgement, a matter of both context and interpretation, requiring careful comparisons and open to questioning.

### Racialized Causal Connections

We cannot overly emphasize the accelerating course of racialized causal connections from President Truman's integration of the armed forces and arming Black soldiers after World War II through the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* “separate is not equal” ruling; the often violent white response to civil rights and integration struggles of the 1960s and continuing today: the still-contested 1964 Voting Rights and 1965 Civil Rights legislation, provoking massive public and private efforts to maintain school and neighborhood segregation.

Even the nonideological academic study of these issues has become known as the three big, easily manipulated scare words: *Critical Race Theory*. While there are reflections in today's conflicts of pre-Civil War America

and incomplete Reconstruction, contexts and relationships differ.

Through the 1960s to the present, in ebbs and flows, with changes in partisan dominance at local, state and federal levels, formerly restricted public monies are transferred to fund private schooling (and even home-schooling).

Charter academies bloom — increasingly for profit, and quasi- or illegal; inner-city schools decline and/or close; redlining takes increasingly varied forms. Especially at local and state levels in radically gerrymandered red states, ignoring laws on the books intersects with revising laws by judges or unrepresentative councils and legislatures.

Affirmative action and equal opportunity programs, occasionally misapplied, are most often misrepresented and radically exaggerated without evidence, now by the Supreme Court.

In his June 2023 majority opinion on banning affirmative action in university admissions, Chief Justice Roberts demonstrates a willful ignorance of the U.S. Constitution as well as case law past and present, U.S. history, and basic logic. How can the Fourteenth Amendment equal protection guarantees have nothing to do with race, as Roberts would have us believe?

At times, national politics seems to resemble the decade before the actual Civil War. This is incomplete: a progressive-for-its-times third party developed in the 1850s, not in the 2010s and early 2020s. The historical domination of the two party system underscores the limits of American exceptionality.

### Destabilizing Politics

What is most novel today is the largely unexamined, sometimes conflicting but always contradictory interplay among local, state, and federal governments; the judiciary at all levels; law “enforcement;” the no longer conservative but radical rightwing Republican party and its governance in red states; the current majority and paralysis in the U.S. House of Representatives; and the state of presidential politics.

Cross-currents that were considered to be “balancing” and “stabilizing” factors in the political system are now the opposite, as almost all issues are misrepresented and intensely divisive. Not coincidentally, at the same time, an endless variety of legal and extra-legal efforts to maintain white power are attempted, also inconsistently at all levels.

These range from anti-constitutional “gun rights” to voting restrictions, anti-choice and anti-diversity measures and environmental inaction, to bans on books and most forms



of affirmative action, and personal freedoms including young people’s right to grow up as who they are, as seen in outlawing medical care for trans youth.

Reductions in funding for public social services and schools, as opposed to private sectors, accompany shifts in job opportunities with increasing prerequisites. The very real social, economic and political gains of Blacks, Latinos, Asians, women — none of which are homogeneous groupings — and others over decades now compete in dialectical struggles with counter-forces.

The complexity of these currents is seldom appreciated in the rush toward linear, contradictory narratives of one group “rising” and others “falling.” Past or present life is never a zero-sum game. Neither are our futures.

### Advances and Retreats

That complex process of advances inseparable from retreats continued from the end of World War II through the Nixon, Carter, Reagan, Bush One and Clinton administrations.

Scales began to shift between the economic downturns of the 1990s and 2000s, and the rise of Newt Gingrich’s right wing, states’ “rights” and racist power grabs in Congress, and their widespread ripples and political shifts in many states.

The national trauma of *Bush Two v. Gore* (the stolen 2000 election in Florida) followed by Bush’s two terms, the fright and counter reactions after 9/11, and the intensely racist response to the popular election of the United States’ first and only Black president in 232 years all contributed to the “rise” of the incoherent and policy-less Tea Party, the birth mother of Trumpism.

Over these decades, the established meanings of both liberal and conservative are lost. “Liberals” and “moderates” are now an undefined but potentially extreme “left,” and self-described “progressives” (who have little clear relationship to Progressives of the early 20th century) are labeled “far” or “extreme left.”

For their part, conservatives largely lost their historical foundations in values and doctrines of conservatism developed over centuries. Most — at least those active publicly — are now inseparable from “right-wing radicals,” “militants,” or “ideologues.” Long-accepted terms and maxims lost their meaning.

Accompanying these campaigns is the Republican recognition that their minority political power depends on imperatives for voter suppression inside and outside the law. This

intersects with the exaggerated, not unprecedented promotion of census trends that the white U.S. population will shortly be a minority population. Hatred against Muslims, Arabs and a generalized brown subject is a natural outgrowth of this paranoia.

In a historian’s view, the power and impact of these efforts exceeds the extent and influence of the Hearst “yellow press” of the earlier 20th century, or later, the manipulated mainstream media-enforced pro-Vietnam war “consensus” (which sent me to Canada in 1970). Partly in response, genuinely alternative media — primarily in print — developed. (The 21st century still awaits the latter.)

Into this increasingly volatile and unstable mix, the relative success of Trump’s and his Trumpists’ media- and fear-driven minority campaigns made headway, amplified by widespread disinformation efforts.

The lying distortion of the results of the 2020 presidential election galvanized a small percentage but intensely Trump-loyal minority to attempt an insurrection, the first of its kind in U.S. history.

The simple fact that Trump twice failed to capture a majority of the popular vote, but was elected once, underscores the historical contradictions and comparative anomaly of the American “system” of government. It’s another element of original compromises that long ago lost their meanings.

### Toward an “Unprecedented” Election?

In this context, the combined forces of unusual but not unprecedented, sharp ruptures of the states into red and blue, with red states more right wing than at any time since the *real* Civil War of the 1860s and Reconstruction; a closely divided Congress with limited ability to enact policy even when supported by substantial majorities of Americans; and most starkly a packed radical right-wing Supreme Court majority hell-bent on ignoring the Constitution, case law, judicial conservatism and history, wreak havoc today and for the foreseeable future.

Along with the legislative branch, the judiciary feasts on private corporate profiteering. Formally equal under the law, all branches of government function in practice outside and above the written laws.

These are the contexts of conflicts and contradictions with which we face the 2024 presidential and other elections. To a considerable extent, they crystallize our major challenges.

The overarching questions for our short and long term futures are the relevance, resiliency, and functional interconnections of the U.S. system of 1) local, but especially state and federal governing components and their interrelationships including partisan politics and voting rights; 2) a federal system of Constitutionalism and three “separate but equal branches of government” — executive, judicial, and legislative — and their relationships; and 3) 250 years of struggle to fulfill the “American Dream” of equal opportunity,

in structural tension with formal but unrealized “equal rights under the law.”

At each point, the question of the unprecedentedness of our own times comes sharply into focus. Will our incomplete and contradictory precedents, systems, structures, and foundations still stand through 2024, 2028 and beyond? With two parties or more? An amended Constitution? Enforced codes of ethics? Redefined relationships among the “separate branches”? A recommitment to genuinely “equal opportunity for all”? *With what new experiences and experiments?*

If we are truly at a tipping point, will politics turn sharply right, or toward the direction where the popular majority actually stand on most issues, moderate to *mildly progressive?*

The 2024 election will help to answer these questions, in part that is. But it is far from the end of the story. In any case, *history is instructive but never predictive.* ■

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- “Media misconceptions and the ten minute historical memory,” *Busting Myths, Columbus Free Press*, Dec. 29, 2021
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## We Stand with Ukraine. We Stand with Palestine. End the Genocide in Gaza!

PRESIDENT BIDEN HAS asserted that just as the United States stands with Ukraine in its war with Russia, the United States needs to stand with Israel in its war with Palestine. But we in the Ukraine Solidarity Network believes that he has got things exactly backwards.

The real parallels between Ukraine and Palestine became strikingly clear when Benjamin Netanyahu came to the United Nations waving a “map of Israel” including all of Gaza and the West Bank — obliterating Palestine’s existence — exactly as Vladimir Putin claims that “Ukraine was never a real country.”

Commentators on Russian state television saying that Ukrainians are “Nazis,” who need to be eradicated, match with the Israeli president’s proclamation that “there are no innocents in Gaza.”

In both cases these statements unmistakably indicate genocidal trajectories.

We support Ukraine’s right to receive weapons from any source to defend its national survival.

We do not support U.S. military subsidies to Israel, which fuel its decades-long dispossession of the Palestinian people, and its “crimes of apartheid and persecution” identified by Amnesty International.

We hold the United States government’s policies responsible for Israel’s continual destruction of Palestine, and its killing and injuring tens of thousands of Palestinians by



military attacks, starvation, thirst, and the collapse of medical services.

None of this can be justified or lead to any progressive outcome. We oppose all attacks against innocent civilians in Israel and Palestine.

The first casualty of war, it is said, is truth. Today Israeli and U.S. propaganda dominate much of the media. A new McCarthyism leads corporate donors to pressure univer-

sities to shut down discussion and debate, silencing professors and students, forbidding protests, and canceling public events.

We oppose discrimination against Arabs and Jews, as we do against Ukrainians and Russians, and we demand protection for freedom of assembly, press, and speech.

The violence of the occupier and that of a people resisting occupation can never be equated. We support the struggle of the Ukrainian people to compel Russia to withdraw its military forces from Ukraine and end its occupation of Ukrainian territory. We support the global struggle to stop Israel’s genocidal war in Gaza, compel Israel

to declare a ceasefire, lift its siege of Gaza, admit the massive humanitarian aid needed for its people’s survival, end its occupation of Gaza and the West Bank, and dismantle its apartheid system.

—Statement by the Ukraine Solidarity Network (U.S.)  
November 5, 2023.  
<https://linktr.ee/ukrainesolidaritynetwork>



## Abortion Rights Battle in Poland Changes Not Forthcoming?

By Jacek Dalecki & Justyna Zajac

LED BY Law and Justice (PiS), the conservative and far-right parties maintained a firm grip on power in Poland until the fall of 2023 when, in October, the opposition won the parliamentary election. A new more liberal government was sworn in by the President in mid-December.

After eight years of conservative rule, one could expect that the shift of power would lead to dismantling the current restrictive abortion laws. However proponents of abortion rights should be advised to lower their expectations.

In the heyday of the Cold War, Poland was one of the first countries in the Soviet bloc to legalize abortion. In 1956, the act of the Polish parliament allowed for termination of pregnancy in the case of a medical recommendation, due to the difficult living conditions of a woman, and when the pregnancy was a result of an unlawful act. Three years later, the Ministry of Health issued a regulation which, in practice, permitted abortion on demand.

Fast forward to the collapse of Communism and the ensuing democratic resurgence. In 1993, acting under the heavy clout of the Catholic Church, the Polish parliament limited the right to terminate pregnancy to three instances: when pregnancy posed a threat to the health or life of the woman, when there was a high probability of “severe and irreversible impairment” of the fetus, and when pregnancy resulted from a criminal act.

The law remained intact until the conservative and far-right parties came to power in 2015. Reaping the fruits of their electoral victory, the conservative MPs endorsed a blanket ban on abortion as drafted by the ultra-conservative NGO *Ordo Iuris*.

After MPs initially abandoned their proposal following the massive street protests, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal — whose legitimacy and independence have been widely questioned — came to their rescue. In October 2020, it ruled that termination of pregnancy even on the grounds of “severe and irreversible fetal defect or incurable illness that threatens the fetus’ life” was

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*The newly elected Polish parliament lists strengthening the rights of women as its sixth highest priority. But it failed to mention the right to abortion. In both 2015 and 2020 there have been massive protests demanding abortion rights. Will they happen again?*

unconstitutional.

Considering that, prior to the Tribunal’s decision, over 90% of legal abortions had been performed because of impaired fetal growth, the Tribunal’s decision meant a near-total abortion ban.<sup>1</sup>

### Sticking Out Like a Sore Thumb

In the October election, three political groupings — the center-right Civic Coalition, the Christian-democratic Third Way, and the progressive Left — won the absolute majority in the parliament, receiving 30.7%, 14.4%, and 8.6% of votes, respectively.

Among the three partners, only the Left seems ready to propose meaningful changes. The electoral campaign of the Left — a loose alliance of five small parties — frequently featured women who have been fighting for women’s rights for years. Agnieszka Dziemianowicz-Bąk, Wanda Nowicka, Dorota Olko, and Joanna Izabela Scheuring-Wielgus have been among the most recognizable faces in the struggle for abortion rights.

In mid-November, at the opening session of the new parliament, the Left announced two bills aimed at liberalizing the current abortion law. One proposed a complete

legalization of the right to terminate pregnancy up to the 12th week of gestation. The other proposed to decriminalize those who assisted in an abortion.

At the time of this writing, the Left upped the ante, amending its original proposal to permitting abortions until the 24th week. According to the Left, this revision reflected the guidelines of the World Health Organization.

But being a junior partner in the coalition, the Left desperately needs the support of its political partners. It is doubtful whether this support will materialize.

### Evasive We Stand

Four weeks after the election, the coalition signed an agreement that outlined 24 objectives for a future government coalition. The goal of strengthening the rights of women — without explicitly mentioning the right to abortion — was listed as number six.

At first glance, this elevated position appears promising. Yet declarations should not be conflated with the coalition’s willingness and commitment to standing up for women’s reproductive rights.

For the Civic Coalition, the question

of abortion rights has been a political hot potato. On the one hand, during the election campaign the Coalition promised to introduce legislation to allow for abortion through the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. Donald Tusk, the Coalition's leader, warned that only those who support abortion rights would be placed on the party's slates.

On the other hand, the Coalition was quick to recognize the divisive nature of abortion politics and allowed its MPs to "vote their conscience" when their beliefs would be at odds with the party line. In the same vein, the Coalition did not formally propose any legislative initiatives to amend the legal status quo.

The leaders of the Christian-democratic Third Way — Szymon Hołownia and Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz — have openly expressed their opposition in principle to legalizing abortion.

Hołownia, a former TV personality and a new speaker of parliament, used to assure the viewers of his YouTube show "God in Big City" (a biblical reference to sacrificing freedom in order to survive), that, for him, abortion "was always a murder... killing of an innocent being." He dreamt of the times "when abortion was banned."<sup>2</sup>

As one of the commentators, Katarzyna Przyborska, poignantly concluded, Hołownia would support reproductive rights "once he got pregnant."<sup>3</sup> Kosiniak-Kamysz, a licensed dentist and a devout Catholic, has regularly emphasized that abortion was a matter of one's beliefs, religion, and values. Both leaders have also underscored that a decision on whether to ease access to abortion should be made by the people.

Not surprisingly, Hołownia and Kosiniak-Kamysz have been pushing the idea of a nationwide referendum on abortion. Both have been aware that even if the referendum turned out in favor of liberalizing the abortion law, President Andrzej Duda, a vocal opponent of abortion, was expected to disregard its result.

### The Public Is Not in the Mood

What also works against the Left's plans is the lack of societal consensus on the extent of abortion rights.

On the one hand, thousands of Poles took to the streets in 2016 to protest the legislative proposal that would limit access to abortion in all cases except to protect woman's life.<sup>4</sup> More demonstrations followed in response to the 2020 Constitutional Tribunal's ruling.

On the other hand, according to the 2016 Public Opinion Research Center survey, half of Poles believed that access to abortion should be restricted or even banned. The subsequent studies of public attitudes reflect-

ed the results of the 2016 survey.

In the public opinion polls conducted in April 2023, most respondents agreed that abortion should be legally allowed only in three instances: when a mother's life or health were at risk (82% and 80%, respectively), when pregnancy was the result of a criminal act (80%), and when it was known that the child would be born handicapped (62%).

Only one-fifth of the public supported the right to abortion in the case of a difficult material situation (21%) personal circumstances (20%), or a woman's decision not to have a child (18%).<sup>5</sup>



### What the Political Crystal Ball Tells Us

The Left faces an unenviable conundrum. Poland is one of only two European Union member states that has not legalized abortion on broad social grounds.

Undoubtedly, the Left would like to see the difficult living circumstances included among the conditions for the admissibility of abortion. Yet this sentiment can be easily interpreted as a longing for rights once granted to women during the Communist past — hardly a selling point in the post-1989 political climate.

The views of the majority of Poles reflect a general unfavorable attitude toward termination of pregnancy. At best, the public may be willing to support the 1993 act that had already severely limited access to abortion, well short the Left's hopes.

Reading the tea leaves, the Left's coalition partners chose the strategy of avoidance

and evasiveness. Paradoxically, the views on abortion of the key politicians of the Civic Coalition and the Third Way are closer to that of the Law and Justice than the Left.

When Jarosław Kaczyński, the gerontocratic leader of PiS, declared that a fetus "who was destined to die" should be "baptized, buried, and have a name,"<sup>6</sup> his words could also be attributed to the key personas of the anti-Law and Justice alliance.

The outcome of the 2023 election in Poland is said to ease the worries of those "concerned about the risk of entrenched illiberalism."<sup>7</sup> Alas, the prospects of extending abortion rights in Poland remain bleak. ■

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## Boris Kagarlitsky Released!



BORIS KARGARLITSKY HAS been outspoken in opposing Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He was arrested on July 26, 2023 on charges of "justifying terrorism," supposedly for a social media post about the successful Ukrainian 2022 attack on the bridge linking Crimea to Russia.

In response to his arrest, a broad range of organizations and prominent individuals formed an international committee to demand his release.

At his trial the prosecution requested that Kargarlitsky be found guilty and be sentenced to 5.5 years in prison. Instead he was given a hefty fine of 600,000 rubles (about US\$6500). Released from the

courthouse, he is forbidden from editing any media outlet or website for two years. (He is the founder of Rabkor, a critical Russian multimedia platform that promotes a democratic perspective.)

Since the end of the Soviet Union, Boris Kagarlitsky has been a prominent democratic socialist critic of the emerging Russian capitalist state and its oligarchy. His many books include *Between Class and Discourse: Left Intellectuals in Defense of Capitalism* (2020).

Given that Kargarlitsky's fine is a considerable amount of money, a one-time donation can be sent to <https://www.donationalerts.com/r/rabkortv>. The card for international transfers is 4165 9816 0119 6631. ■

## An Unnatural Disaster: Policing Wildfires

By Ivan Drury Zarin

THE FIRES THAT burned the forests of western Canada through the spring, summer, and early fall of 2023 were the hottest, broadest and most destructive in the region's recorded history. Two million eight hundred thousand hectares burned in British Columbia (BC) alone — twice the area burned during the previous record-breaking wildfire year of 2018.

The entire city of Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories, was evacuated, as was the entire city of West Kelowna, and a number of smaller communities and neighborhoods. Four hundred homes were destroyed, and three firefighters were killed on the job.

There is nothing more significant than the fact of the fires themselves — which should be indisputable evidence that global warming has reached a point of absolute crisis. The solution should be equally obvious: that we must end the destruction of our biosphere. To do that we urgently need a socialist reorganization of our world.

But this straightforward solution depends on the fulfillment of a double maximum program that we are not near realizing.

Even if we could pull off this feat immediately, we would still be stuck with managing the fallout from decades of carbon pollution and broader, interlocking problems created by the logic of the capitalist mode of production — from strip mining, to clear cutting forests, to paving over wetlands for ports, and damming and flooding environmentally critical mountain valleys for hydroelectric power, to responding to forest fires only after they've started burning.

For so long as we are painted into a corner of climate crisis, wildfire management will itself be a theatre of political activity. The

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*Tsilhqot'in cultural burning shows the alternative to wildfire destruction.*

strategies of fighting wildfires used by governments in Canada, similar to those used in all imperialist states, are rooted in a politics of private property, profit, and value production that treat forests as a store of "fixed" capital.

Add to that a politics of settler colonialism, the geographical and political framework that provides that store, free of charge.

Government strategies of wildfire management are failing precisely because of the limitations imposed by the capitalist and settler colonial frameworks that define them.

Rather than approach wildfires through ecosystem wellbeing, in a triad of land, water, and fire stewardship — the models practiced by Indigenous nations who worked the forests for millennia, before the recent arrival of European settlers — governments rely on suppression, a strategy I'm referring to as wildfire policing.

### Shooting at Wildfires

The BC government's longstanding commodity-management wildfire policy is essentially a police action. Once a fire reaches a point of crisis, politicians declare a state of emergency, deploy troops who shoot at wildfires with weapons designed to suppress the active event. This means water bombers, chemical sprays, pumps and hoses, trenches,

breaks, and burns and borders cut into the land ahead of the fire's spread.

The approach to fighting wildfires has the same logic as the policy of policing communities during social crises. Policing actions target the overflow effects of social relations in a given container.

In a city, social policing represses the survival and resistance activities of those people cast out of wage labor pools and all those who threaten, by their stubborn existence or by their organized actions, to disrupt the smooth iteration of capitalist circuits of production, distribution, and reproduction.

In a forest and on the land, fire policing represses the flames that spark out of fuel piles left as the wreckage of logging operations, which then escape to flame by the high temperatures of global warming.

It spreads from isolated mountainsides to threaten major human settlements and passageways that transport critical infrastructure to those settlements.

Policing is the strategy of force deployed to dampen down or eliminate the elemental energies of communities, and natural world, that are antagonistic by nature to the demands of capitalist production.

After the disastrous summer of 2023, the BC New Democratic Party government announced plans for a province-wide wildfire taskforce. But the budget for wildfire management still tilts heavily toward policing fires.

Fighting the BC fires of 2023 cost nearly \$1 billion. The previous decade, the Province spent an average of \$300 million a year fighting fires. But between 2004 and 2018, the BC government invested only \$81 million in prevention. From 2019 to 2023 it was less than \$100 million. The government spent less than five percent of fire policing dollars on fire prevention.

Sarah Dickson-Hoyle, post-doctoral research fellow with the UBC Faculty of Forestry, estimates that cleaning up wildfire fuel would cost about \$6,000 per hectare in BC's interior forests, and about \$30,000 per hectare in the coastal region.<sup>1</sup>

Even if the government were proposing to spend this kind of money on fire prevention, it would have to be read as a massive subsidy to forestry conglomerates, which the government protects, instead of demanding that they clean up the mess they make. There are 60 million hectares of forests in BC.

### Wildfire Colonialism

What distinguishes the NDP's climate destruction and wildfire policing from the policies of rightwing parties, the official opposition BC United and the far right BC Conservative Party, is that its execution includes civil society groups and some members of Indigenous nations.

From the point of view of settler society, this is partly because most of so-called British Columbia is not treated. This means the "land question" — who has jurisdiction over the management of territories outside of municipalities — is vulnerable to legal and political challenge by First Nations. And it is partly so because of the government's failure to respond to wildfires in Indigenous reserve and rural communities.

In 2018 the Tsilhqot'in nation — whose lands lie in central British Columbia, between the settler towns of Williams Lake and Bella Coola — released a report<sup>2</sup> about the disastrous wildfire the burned through their community in 2017. They found that Indigenous communities in rural areas and on reserves receive "delayed and unequal wildfire protection, in part because of the Province's prioritization of higher-value urban areas."

Reserve lands are under the jurisdiction of the federal government, which operate with some roles delegated to Indigenous leadership. However, emergency management protocols are more complicated, with responsibilities divided amongst all levels of government and agencies.

This is the maze that Indigenous leaderships navigate with difficulty during a wildfire crisis. In practice, the federal government expects that Indigenous leaderships will follow their lead.

When the Tl'etinqox government, one of the six Tsilhqot'in communities in the northern interior of BC, decided not to issue an evacuation order during the massive 2017 fires, Canada responded by threatening to send in police and apprehend children who stayed at home with their families.

Tsilhqot'in national government tribal chairman Nitsil'in Joe Alphonse argued that Tsilhqot'in jurisdiction over the wildfire management is not only a matter of response efficiency. "The way that us as First Nations people move through the world and experience the world is vastly different from non-First Nations," Alphonse said.

Canada's paternalistic and colonial policy views Indigenous peoples as "a burden — as something that needs to be changed and assimilated," a "historical perspective" that

the government's wildfire response in 2017 showed is "still active."

The implication of Alphonse's argument is that Indigenous jurisdiction over wildfire management is a matter of general Indigenous sovereignty over their territories.

### Indigenous Stewardship

Managing wildfires is but one detail of a comprehensive Indigenous sovereignist politics that stewards the land.

A mythology fundamental to settler colonialism in Canada is that the "resources" on the land, like trees standing in the forest and salmon spawning up streams, are a naturally existing and free gift available to be exploited by capitalist industry.

But the lands occupied by Canada and the United States have been actively stewarded by Indigenous peoples for more than ten thousand years. Indigenous fire stewardship includes "cultural burning" to reduce fuel loads and modify landscapes, habitats, and fauna species to protect against fire destruction. Making forests more habitable also increases access to food sources.

This fire stewardship is an example of human labor power interwoven into the land. It is an intrinsic element of the land wealth stolen through settler colonialism.<sup>3</sup>

The forests invaded by industrial logging companies are not "raw;" they are the products of thousands of years of stewardship by Indigenous nations, following non-capitalist logic of reciprocal, land-based economies.

Revolutionary socialists have also often failed to reckon with the political and economic meanings of Indigenous land stewardship. The Marxist critique of capitalism that values are produced only through the exploitation of human labor power in the process of commodity production discounts the human labor power invested in the lands stolen and incorporated into that production regime as "fixed" capital.

Indigenous land, water and fire stewardship adds value to the lands that appear "natural" to the European eye — a view fundamental to an economic and social order that perceives nature as radically other to society. So when forestry conglomerates hire workers to clear cut a forest, they rip living trees out of their soils composed of a living amalgam of organisms, and abstract them — transforming them into commodity forms.

Those trees appear as fixed capital made productive by the application of labor power in the activity of chainsaw wielding and helicopter-flying workers. But the labor power of hundreds of generations of Indigenous peoples is interwoven with the non-human social relations that constitute that land; it is stolen, unpaid and unfree, in that same moment.

For governments eager to stop wildfires from burning cities and towns and destroying supply lines, the colonial viewpoint that treats

the forest as "wild" disappears Indigenous peoples. Or, where it recognizes Indigenous nations at all, it treats them as external to the land. That means governments appropriate aspects of Indigenous fire stewardship practices as another element of a fire policing policy. But this will not work to stop fires.

As argued in a 2022 article, "The Right to Burn," about Indigenous fire stewardship practices, "Indigenous knowledge is not a 'thing' that can be captured and incorporated into plans by agencies to inform wildfire management."<sup>4</sup>

### Abolish Wildfire Policing

Governments police the actions of Indigenous nations even when they set up partnerships. They force Indigenous nations to apply for permits, which must conform to Canada's controlled burn-criteria, to conduct burns on Crown lands.

As socialists, we need to develop a revolutionary socialist politics of wildfires and forestry. For so long as Indigenous labor is unrecognized and stolen along with the trees and other wealth of the land, the only class interaction that workers, including forestry workers and fire fighters can have with the land is colonial.

A precursor to developing an autonomous working-class politics of land relations and a socialist program for wildfire management and logging — to take one example of the industries that depend on this exploitative relation — is to abolish the social relationship that steals Indigenous labor and social relations along with the land.

Even more critical is that Indigenous stewardship is an organic part of a whole Indigenous land, water and fire stewardship politics. It includes defense against oil and gas extraction, pipelines and logging old growth forests. These land defense actions are criminalized by the same governments that want to appropriate Indigenous stewardship practices when it suits them. Indigenous claims to exercise fire stewardship is about Indigenous national wealth. It is about the past as well as the future. ■

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## Looking through the Lens of Race and Labor: Defeat of the Chilean Constitution

By Carolina Bank Muñoz

ON OCTOBER 18, 2019, Chile *despertó* (woke up). It started with students jumping subway turnstiles in protest of a 30-cent subway fare increase, and quickly escalated to a series of massive protests. Activists astutely pointed out “*no son 30 pesos, son 30 años*” (it’s not 30 cents it’s 30 years), once again bringing to light the devastating privatization of education, pensions, healthcare and nature. The fare hike was seen as only the most recent assault by a neoliberal regime that had produced all of this.

During the October uprising, then President Sebastian Piñera, who had opposed the arrest and trial of Pinochet, declared war on protesters. He brought the military into the streets, forced a curfew, and took political prisoners. Human Rights Watch documented over 11,500 civilians injured in marches in the first six weeks of demonstrations.

Two dozen protesters and some bystanders were killed, and a shocking 400 people suffered from ocular trauma, mostly resulting from rubber bullets.

This last number is particularly striking because it represents 70% of all ocular traumas in the world over the last 21 years.

The conclusion is obvious: Soldiers aimed at protesters’ eyes to permanently disable them, as part of an open campaign of deliberate brutality. The repression opened old wounds from the trauma of the torture and abuse of the 1973-89 dictatorship — but it also fueled the movement in the streets.

In response to brutal state repression of the protests, over a million people flooded the streets of Santiago, and hundreds of thousands more across the country, demanding the resignation of President Piñera and proposing a constitutional convention. Piñera ignored these calls, but they created a political crisis for his government.

Fearful of his loss of control over the situation, Piñera offered concessions that included reducing the salaries of state officials

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This mural on the side of a building in Arica depicts the Afro-Chilean legacy.

Nell Haynes / Flickr

and halting the subway fare increase. But the masses continued to march.

In early November, labor and social movement organizations called for a general strike if Piñera did not resign and approve a process for a new constitution. The general strike began on November 12, with widespread participation from Chile’s largest unions across all sectors, and threats of a boycott from the International Dockworkers Council.

The general strike marked a turning point in the movement. Piñera did not resign, but his government was forced to negotiate the terms of the new constitution.

The result was an agreement that outlined the process for determining whether a new constitution should be drafted, and whether Chilean citizens should have a voice in selecting who would draft it — both questions to be decided through a plebiscite.

### The Constitutional Convention Process

An overwhelming number turned out for the plebiscite on October 25, 2020, despite its initial postponement and strict COVID restrictions. Seventy-eight percent of voters favored drafting a new constitution, and 79% voted that it should be a constitutional convention with representatives chosen by the people. Constitutional delegates would have a

year to produce a draft of the constitution.

The resulting draft constitution, delivered to Chilean President Gabriel Boric in July 2022, was heralded as the most progressive constitution in the world.

The preamble started by affirming that Chile is a democratic and social state, plurinational, regional, and ecological. The statement acknowledged the responsibility of the state for the wellbeing of its population (reducing inequality, providing social services, caring for the environment). It recognized diversity in terms of Indigenous and Afro-descendent populations, as well as regional diversity.

The new constitution was a response to the disastrous consequences of the neoliberal project over the last 40 years.

Among its most important contributions were the establishment of plurinationality — autonomy, self-determination and self-government of Indigenous nations — and the right to freedom of association including the right to unionization, collective bargaining, strikes, and the right to determine at what level bargaining would take place (branch, sectoral or territorial); gender parity in elections and in elected office, the right to abortion and bodily autonomy, and the right to choose your sexual and gender identity and to have it recognized by the state; and finally, over 50

articles addressed climate justice.

Despite a massive social uprising and an unprecedented constitutional convention process, the proposed constitution was ultimately rejected on September 4, 2022, by over 60% of voters. An astonishing 75% of voters from the lowest-income quartile rejected it. In other words, voters who had the most to gain from the proposed constitution voted it down overwhelmingly.

How do we make sense of this overwhelming rejection? Scholars and pundits like Rene Rojas, Roberto Pizarro Hofer and Ernesto Ottone have explained the rejection of the constitution by critiquing its focus on identitarian and social justice provisions, by explaining how the mandatory vote forced tens of thousands of apolitical citizens to the polls, or by arguing that the proposed constitution was out of step with ordinary people because it was too radical. (See Rojas' article on the *Jacobin* website, December 5, 2022.)

What is under-theorized from these writers is the role of race in the constitutional convention process and plebiscite.

While it is certainly true that there are multiple explanations for the rejection, some of which I write about in a special issue of *The Forge*, I think for too long Chile and Chileans have not wanted to reckon with race. Before getting to an analysis of the role of racism in the rejection vote, I want to spend some time situating Chile racially. (See <https://forgeorganizing.org/issues/reflections-chilean-uprising>)

### Chile's Racial History

Since its independence from Spain, Chile has seen itself, and has been viewed by in other Latin American countries, as a "white country." This national narrative was established so early in its history that race data (outside of categorizing Indigenous people) was not collected in any censuses from 1810, when Chile gained independence, to 2022, producing over 200 years of erasure of Afro-descendant communities in Chile.

*Criollo* nationalism, promulgated by the Chilean-born children of European settlers, served the Chilean state well as it sought to expand its territory further into the North and South in the mid-19th century.

The expansion in the South was driven by the "Pacification of the Araucanía," where the largest concentration of Mapuche people lived, between 1851-1883. The war included the Southern Colonization project, which recruited European immigrants, especially Germans, enticing them with free land in the "uninhabited" areas south of the Rio Bio Bio.

These European immigrants had the dual roles of dispossessing the Mapuche people from their land while "improving" the Chilean racial stock through *blanqueamiento*. (Nearly 100 years later there would be another sizeable German migration because of World

War II).

Almost simultaneously, colonization of the North was driven by the War of the Pacific with Peru and Bolivia between 1879-1883. The war ultimately ended with Chile's acquisition of Arica and its population of Afro-descended peoples, who were subjected to a process of Chileanization along with the Indigenous groups of the North.

In the aftermath of these wars of conquest, *Criollos*, for example Nicolas Palacios, constructed an image of a purer and better Chilean Race. In 1904 he published *Raza Chilena (The Chilean Race)* in which he argued that the exceptional Chilean race is made up of two patriarchal, warrior peoples — the Visigoths of Spain (deemed to have the purest blood through the Nordic line), along with the Mapuche Indigenous people (deemed the strongest warriors and most intelligent of the Indigenous groups).

This led to a national narrative that considered racial mixing in Chile was superior (read whiter) and more effective than in the rest of Latin America. It produced a somewhat different version of what Tianna Paschel calls "mestizaje nationalism."

Erasure of both Afro-descended and Indigenous populations through *mestizaje* nationalism speaks to the depth of both settler colonialism and anti-Blackness in Chile as foundational features of its history. This is well articulated in Anibal Quijano's concept of the Coloniality of Power, in which he argues

*"Coloniality is a constituent and a specific element of the pattern of capitalist power. It is based on the imposition of a racial/ethnic classification on the world's population as a cornerstone of the pattern of power and operates in each of the planes, spheres and dimensions, material and subjective, of every day social existence and societal level."* (<https://www.decolonialtranslation.com/english/quijano-coloniality-of-power.pdf>)

So by the early 1900s, Chileans already experienced themselves as racially homogeneous and the idea of white *mestizaje* became firmly entrenched in the national imagination. European migration to Chile throughout the 20th century, until about 1973, acted to further establish this white racial identity, particularly in Santiago.

The violent overthrow of the democratically elected president Salvador Allende by Augusto Pinochet in 1973 shifted racial dynamics in interesting ways.

On the one hand, the percentage of the foreign-born population drops below one percent. On the other hand, the Mapuche, who at this point have largely been erased from history, are now categorized as "violent terrorists." This is at the same time that Pinochet is implementing the neoliberal shock doctrine by privatizing education, healthcare, pensions and national industries.

Mapuches as "terrorists" becomes a convenient narrative to justify violent state repression of this community. Pinochet dissolves the limited land agreements reached with the Mapuche during the Pacification of the Araucanía and hands these land titles to private mining and forestry corporations.

In the post-1989 transition to democracy, Chile re-emerges as the most politically and economically stable country in Latin America. But the fundamental tenets of neoliberalism are not challenged by the transition governments. Nonetheless, this political and economic stability begins to attract immigrants, initially from neighboring countries such as Argentina and Peru.

But even during this period the foreign-born population does not exceed three percent. Not until 2010 did Chile's immigrant landscape begin to change significantly, when then president Michelle Bachelet opened Chile's doors to Haitian immigrants in the aftermath of the devastating Haitian earthquake.

In 2018 Sebastian Piñera offered Venezuelans fleeing the Maduro government a safe haven. The past six years or so have seen a dramatic shift in the immigrant population, which now makes up about 10% of the overall population.

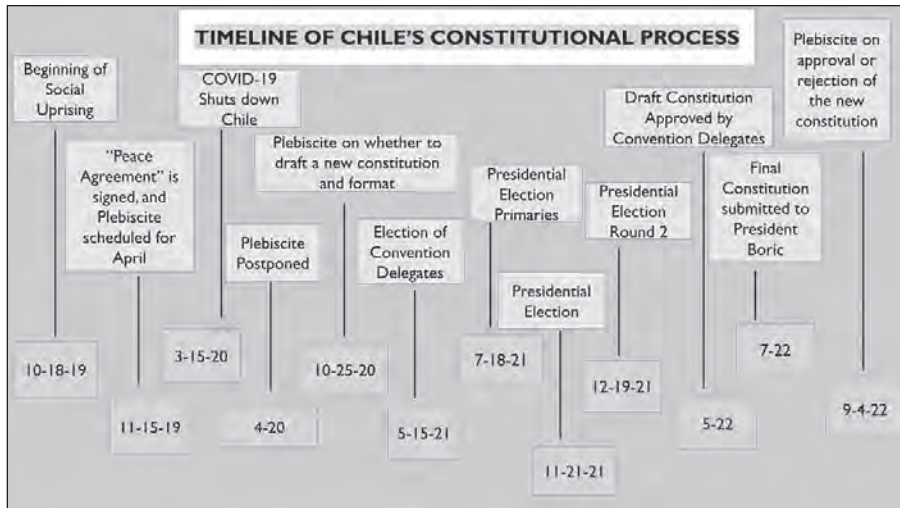
Since the mid-1990s the racialization of immigrants has shifted. Early immigration from Argentina, Peru, Venezuela and Colombia were seen as a net positive. These immigrants tended to be professionals; many were white, certainly whiter than more recent immigrants.

Starting with Haitian migration, however, and more recently with poorer immigrants from Venezuela and Colombia, the narrative has shifted as they tend to be perceived as resource-draining and racialized as Black or at least darker skinned.

For Venezuelans and Colombians this process of racialization has not played out neatly along class lines. There are certainly white and poor Venezuelans and Colombians, just as there are middle class and wealthy Afro-descendant populations. But the national narrative is different. This can be seen in an interesting and subtle shift in language.

Before 2010 most people (and newspaper articles) referred to immigrants as "*Extranjeros*" which translates into foreigners, but also has a value-added connotation, these are the good immigrants, the immigrants that are lifting us up. After Chile opened its borders to Haitian immigrants, language shifted to "*inmigrantes*" or immigrants, which has a resource-draining connotation, and more recently connected to "illegality."

This context of race, colonialism, anti-Blackness and immigration matters because all too often Chileans like to think of ourselves as white people, in a white country. Both our history, and contemporary



The Forge

immigration patterns threaten that (white) national identity.

### Racialized Media Reporting

With a better understanding of Chile's racial context, we can look at how elites used race to stoke fear about Chile's national identity. They could have chosen a number of hot-button issues, including abortion, LGBTQ rights, and the environment, and to some extent they did; but according to our content analysis of more than 1500 newspaper articles (between October 2019 and August 2022), the mainstream media fundamentally relied on racial tropes.

This generally played out in two ways. The conservative media capitalized on the explosion of immigration to Chile to animate existing fears that immigrants are responsible for increasing crime, taking jobs, and using state resources (all of this should sound very familiar in the U.S. context). Similarly, the media used the threat of Mapuche "terrorism" to promote nationalism.

It tells us something important about the centrality of race in Chile when the conservative media, with so many other issues at their disposal, chose plurinationality and immigration as central weapons to undermine the proposed constitution.

Keep in mind that in the 140-page draft constitution, plurinationality is mentioned a total of 13 times, race only explicitly mentioned once. There is no reference to immigrants or migrants at all. Yet gender and LGBTQ issues are mentioned 70 times, and environmental issues a whopping 90 times.

Let me start with a discussion on how the media used immigration.

While debates around immigration and immigration reform have received significant media coverage since the mid-1990s, in our preliminary analysis of *La Tercera* and *El Mercurio* we notice that coverage of immigration especially surges during four recent periods: the October 2018 uprising, the height of Covid, preceding the 2021 presidential election, and then again preceding the final vote

on the constitution in September 2022.

I'll describe a few prominent examples. As an explanation for the Social Uprising, then president Sebastian Piñera proclaimed on national television: "We are at war with an unrelenting and powerful external enemy who respects nothing and no one. An enemy willing to use violence and crime with no limit..." Close advisors to Piñera speculated that the uprising was payback from Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela and left-wing immigrants he sent as agitators after Piñera was elected in 2018.

This perception of Venezuelan left-wing agitators (often racialized as Black) in part led government officials to deport 53 undocumented immigrants for their participation in the social uprising, the majority of whom were from Venezuela. More Venezuelans were imprisoned for their participation in the protests, as well as Peruvians, Colombians and Dominicans.

Over 100 articles alluded to immigrant agitators. For example, one article in *El Mercurio* reports, "immigrants were agitating, when the country needed peace." Another quotes the Minister of the Interior, who states that "immigrants who are participating in the violence against the Chilean state, will be deported."

During the peak of the COVID pandemic, these two newspapers shifted their analysis from dangerous outside agitators to racialized messages about the lack of sanitary conditions in migrant communities.

We found dozens of articles that emphasized multiple immigrant families living in small spaces and the dangers of spreading COVID. One prominent example was the case of a fire in the working-class neighborhood of Estación Central, with *La Tercera* reporting that immigrants who were COVID positive fled during the evacuation, practically putting the entirety of Chile at risk:

"Fire Chief Diego Velazquez stated that there were '2 to 3 covid positive people, we already alerted the health department, the municipality,

and they are looking for these people, because they were mixed up with other people in the same apartment and in the building and we don't know where they are."

The quote doesn't specifically state that the people they were looking for were Black, but we can nonetheless assume this from the article, because of racially coded language that allows us to make these connections. For example, we know that Estación Central is a densely populated Haitian neighborhood.

Countless other articles already established that poor and often Black immigrants lived in cramped, unsanitary conditions. For example, a more sympathetic article in *El Mercurio* reports, "Delia Fernandez is one of hundreds of immigrants who attends the communal food bank to survive. When there is no food at the bank, she has to make ends meet to feed the 13 people in her small apartment."

When the quote about the fire specifies that people were sharing an apartment, in a Black immigrant neighborhood, it makes it fairly easy for readers to reach a particular conclusion about who fled, whether or not it is accurate. In this case, other reports of the fire make it clear that these were Haitian immigrants.

### Toward the Vote

During the leadup to the plebiscite on the proposed constitution, 87 newspaper articles explicitly mention immigration and plebiscite in the same article and another 48 mention immigration and the constitutional convention, even though the proposed constitution contains no articles on immigration.

For example, Cristián Allendes, president of the National Society of Agriculture, states "our top priorities for the convention are securing water rights, land rights, and control of Indigenous and immigrant populations."

While the conservative media were using immigration to create a sense of national crisis, especially in the North, they invoked Mapuche "violence and terrorism" to stoke racial fear in the South.

In over 70% of the newspaper articles we looked at covering Mapuche struggles for self-determination during this period, "terrorism" or "violence" was used to describe direct action tactics or property destruction, even in the vast majority of cases where there was no threatened or actual harm to humans.

*La Tercera* reports:

"Clearly 'there has been a resurgence of the conflict between mapuches and the Chilean state in the last few years, with 359 attacks attributed to mapuche extremists since 2020. The majority of these attacks have been directed at commercial activities, and businesses in the region."

The article clearly intended to raise alarm about an out-of-control situation with

Mapuche extremists. The last sentence of the quote is noteworthy, stating that most of these attacks are directed at commercial activities and businesses.

The report doesn't explain that what little land the Mapuche have is further encroached upon by the logging and mining industries. Nor does the article explain that Chile's anti-terrorism law passed in 1984 during the Pinochet dictatorship continues to be disproportionately applied to Mapuche communities.

Ahead of the final vote on the new constitution, dozens of opinion pieces and columns in *La Tercera* and *El Mercurio* made a case for Chilean nationalism and patriotism, citing that plurinationality was divisive. For example, Francisco Bartolucci Johnston wrote:

*"Chile is a single race, a single people, and a single nation, which has been forged throughout five centuries of history with the input of its Indigenous peoples, the Spanish founders, and from a variety of identities that throughout time were integrated into the country. This fusion of races is Chile, and gives a place to the Chilean nation and its own culture."*

This quote recalls Nicolas Palacio's description of a unique and exceptional Chilean race. In the end, media representations of both Mapuche "terrorism" in the south, and an invasion of "illegal" immigrants from the north, created a crisis of internal and external enemies who threatened Chilean national identity rooted in "white *mestizaje*."

### Stoking Fear

Having established how the media stoked racial fear as a key strategy to undermine the vote on the proposed constitution, I want to focus on how this played out as unions tried to turn out their members for the approval.

Union and social movement activists I spoke to often reported that there was a lot of confusion about plurinationality in their conversations with members.

Ten workers I interviewed in March 2022 expressed that they thought plurinationality was about both Indigenous people and immigrants. They interpreted it as formally recognizing many nationalities. Some of these workers, being immigrants, were excited about the prospects of legalizing their status, while Chilean nationals suggested that they were sympathetic to the recognition of Chile's Indigenous groups but did not believe that Chile should open its borders to everyone.

I don't have clear evidence to prove that linking issues of Indigenous sovereignty with immigration was an intentional strategy on the right, but the confusion of plurinationality with open borders suggests it was an easy link to make, or rather one that readers could be counted on to make without the need to state it explicitly. Camila, a feminist activist, called it a "perfect storm."

The confusion about the meaning of plurinationality, a central feature of the proposed constitution, speaks to challenges that labor and social movement organizations faced in mobilizing their members to vote to approve the new constitution. Unions generally de-emphasized the social movement provisions in the constitution, particularly plurinationality.

Union leaders in the Starbucks union and in the Valparaiso Port union, who were younger and came out of student activism, mistook the symbolic politics of waving the Mapuche flag as an indication that the provisions around Indigenous sovereignty would not be controversial.

In response to my questions about plurinationality, Pilar, a Starbucks worker, said "there has been a huge cultural shift in Chile. More and more people are identifying with their Indigenous roots. Look at all the Mapuche flags in the protests. It's a non-issue. People are already onboard with the Mapuche struggle."

Others, such as the leaders of the Mining and Walmart unions, didn't see plurinationality as a central issue for their membership and preferred to engage with the provisions most directly associated with labor. For example Federico, a member activist in the mining union, stated:

*"[W]hen I go talk to members about the constitution, I focus on the labor provisions. I tell them that it will make us stronger and more powerful. The other provisions are important, I support them, but ultimately our members will vote in favor of it because it changes things for them."*

In short, labor failed to anticipate how the right would use provisions around Indigenous sovereignty and a more generalized fear about "illegal immigration" to produce an outsized sentiment that the progressive constitution would divide Chile's core national identity, firmly rooted in "white *mestizaje*." As a result; they lacked strategies to undercut the impact of this powerful narrative.

Union leaders often told me that they really wanted to figure out how to better incorporate immigrant workers into the union. They understood that they needed to address serious racial inequities in the workplace. Yet at the end of the day, they have not been able to address these issues fast enough.

The labor movement's failure to address plurinationality, racism and anti-Blackness, to build solidarity between immigrant workers and Chilean nationals, and to inoculate their members against racist tropes, ultimately undermined their efforts to organize a strong yes vote for the proposed constitution, which would have been a game changer for everyone.

### Contemporary Racial Formation

The constitutional convention process is a rich site for us to explore contemporary

racial formation in Chile. The Chilean center and far right acted as a unified class, using their arsenal of resources to provoke fear and crisis. The left was disorganized and did not anticipate how the right would mobilize race.

Our content analysis shows that both "illegal" immigration in the North and Mapuche "violence" in the South, during the constitutional convention and leading up to the September 2022 plebiscite, were effectively used to convince voters that the constitution imperiled Chile's national identity.

The far right took the trope of the violent Mapuche directly from the dictatorship, and added the threat of a racialized immigrant population to their playbook. These tropes ultimately served to preserve their economic and political interests.

Chile's legacy of "white *mestizaje*" was under-theorized by scholars who were more likely to attribute the No vote to social class, political mechanisms, and the "radicalism" of the proposed constitution.

Importantly, it was misunderstood or misapprehended by labor and social movement actors who either ignored race in their organizing or assumed that symbolic politics like the widespread waving of Mapuche flags, indicated that questions of Indigenous sovereignty would not be controversial.

But the effective campaign of promoting racial fear and instability trumped symbolic politics. Even though 80% of Chileans say they agree that Indigenous people should have rights, when these claims were tested in the proposed constitution with policies that would allow Indigenous people to have their own judicial system and be formally recognized, most Chileans voted against it.

While this was a devastating loss, I think there are many lessons to be learned from the constitutional process. As in Chile, U.S. labor and social movement organizations must confront the right's effort to create wedges and divisions along multiple axes. And the Chilean example helps us think through questions about how labor and social movement politics should deal with white supremacy as part of a larger political project.

Like its Chilean counterpart, the U.S. labor movement doesn't have a great track record on race and immigration (though this certainly has been changing). I believe looking carefully and critically at Chile for both scholars and activists will be fruitful in the struggles to come. ■

THE CONSTITUTIONAL COUNCIL dominated by conservative forces produced its proposed text to replace the Pinochet-era constitution. The national plebiscite, held December 17, went down to defeat by a 56% majority. President Gabriel Boric, who backed the first plebiscite, reaffirmed that he will not push for a third rewrite. The existing Pinochet constitution remains in place. ■



## **Rustin: the Movie & the Mass Organizer** By Joel Geier

BAYARD RUSTIN WAS the most talented mass organizer the American left has yet produced. His greatest success was the 1963 March on Washington, a turning point that aided the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banning segregated public facilities and discrimination in employment.

For many years, Rustin's accomplishments were minimized, hidden or denied because he was an openly gay man. Gay consciousness in recent years reestablished his importance to the civil rights movement, but beyond the LGBTQ community, he often remains an obscure, minor figure.

*Rustin*, the new movie celebrating the 60th anniversary of the March and starring Colman Domingo as Rustin, restores Bayard's importance as the architect of the March.

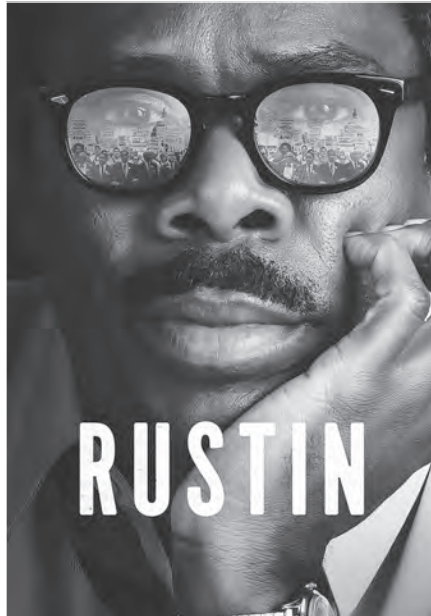
It is a powerful movie that reawakens memories of American reality before the victories of the 1960s. With small snippets of Little Rock, the sit-ins and Birmingham, we are reminded that brutal white racism was tolerated as daily norms. It underscores how disgraceful are the current attacks to roll back the gains of the 1960s struggles when conditions were even worse than today's reactionary political and racist climate.

It was only mass struggle from below that overcame those conditions. As the movie suggests, most of the political establishment of the day — the Kennedy Administration, the FBI, congressional Democrats from Adam Clayton Powell to Strom Thurmond — tried to prevent the March. The worst attempts to abort the March were heavily directed against Rustin, its organizer and public face, as a draft dodger, communist, homosexual, and convicted "sex pervert."

The power of the movie is its excellent portrayal of how Rustin organized the 1963 March. It begins by dramatically counterposing his role in the March on Conventions of 1960 to the 1963 March.

In 1960 Rustin was driven out of leadership and organizing, while in 1963 the attacks against him were unsuccessful. The movie naively depicts both outcomes as dependent solely on personal decisions by Martin Luther

*Joel Geier was a leader of the left wing of the Young Peoples Socialist League during the period depicted in Rustin. Several of his recent articles on the history of the International Socialists political tendency have appeared in Jacobin.*



King. In 1960, King is presented as intimidated by gay-baiting blackmail by Congressman Adam Clayton Powell in collaboration with Roy Wilkins, the head of the NAACP. But in 1963, King does not capitulate.

In presenting the changing dynamic between the two marches and Rustin's role as a function of King's individual personal choice,

the movie fails to understand that the two different outcomes resulted from the change that the mass movement underwent in the intervening three years.

Through direct action struggles, the movement had become more militant while its political consciousness, combativity and self-confidence had matured. It was skeptical, even antagonistic, to establishment figures and had elevated King to a more powerful position than Democratic Party hacks like Powell or Wilkins.

### **Movement Strategist**

The movie focuses on Rustin and King, but unfortunately does not explore the partnership they had developed in the 1950s, which turned each of them into essential instruments of the emerging new movement.

In the early days of the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott, the historic Black trade union leader A. Philip Randolph sent Bayard, his closest political collaborator, to Montgomery to determine what national support they could provide. Bayard had long, intense discussions with King, in which he convinced King of nonviolent resistance.

Bayard became convinced of King's potential national role as a great, inspiring orator with a brilliant mind. King was then at the start of his career, unknown outside

*RUSTIN IS A 2023 American biographical drama film directed by George C. Wolfe, from a screenplay by Julian Breece and Dustin Lance Black, and a story by Breece about the life of civil rights activist Bayard Rustin. Produced by Barack and Michelle Obama's production company Higher Ground, the film stars Colman Domingo in the title role, alongside Chris Rock, Glynn Turman, Aml Ameen, Gus Halper, CCH Pounder, Da'Vine Joy Randolph, Johnny Ramey, Michael Potts, Jeffrey Wright and Audra McDonald.*

A 2003 PBS documentary on Rustin, "Brother Outsider," helped bring him back to public attention.

This review by Joel Geier, a participant in the movement during the events depicted in the new movie, discusses some of the left-socialist politics that provided the orientation and backbone of the organizing efforts. His article "Socialists Organized in the 1950s Civil Rights Movement" appeared in *Jacobin*, October 2, 2021.

Further background can be found in the following sources.

"The Prophet Gone Astray," Peter Drucker's *Against the Current* review of John D'Emilio's biography *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (2003), is posted on our website, in *ATC* 114. For the "Shachtmanites" history see Drucker's political study *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist's Odyssey Through the "American Century"* (1994), which was reviewed by David Finkel on our website, in *ATC* 57.

Tom Kahn's journey to the right wing of social democracy and an architect of AFL-CIO pro-imperialist foreign policy is a complex tragic story beyond the scope of this movie or review. His longtime friend Rachele Horowitz discussed his life in an essay posted at: [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/wp-content/files\\_mf/1389822103d11Horowitz.pdf](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/wp-content/files_mf/1389822103d11Horowitz.pdf).

Montgomery, politically inexperienced and lacking many organizing skills. Bayard became his principal political adviser, organizer and fundraiser, and spent the next three years working to promote King as a national leader.

Rustin ghostwrote King's first published article, "Our Struggle," for the magazine *Liberation*, of which Bayard was an editor. It was the first of many King speeches and articles that Rustin drafted or edited, including "Stride Toward Freedom."

The key idea that Bayard took from the bus boycott mobilizations and mass meetings was that the Black church had the potential to be the vehicle for setting in motion the Black working class and tenant farmers. The only independent Black institution in many places could not be ignored or bypassed.

Bayard proposed to King the creation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) as an organization for those ministers who would engage in direct action. The formation of the SCLC as King's organization elevated King as the central leader of the Black church, the channel for the southern mass movement.

In the North, Rustin became the spokesman for King, the SCLC and the southern movement. He created the ties between King and A. Philip Randolph. Randolph had been the organizer of the famous March on Washington Movement of 1941 that won the Fair Employment Practice during WW2, and of the threatened 1948 March that forced the end of segregation in the armed forces.

Rustin arranged the first event in support of Montgomery and King, a Madison Square Garden rally of 20,000 people. It was an enormous breakthrough in the 1950s climate of Cold War McCarthyism. Building on this success, Rustin became the coordinator of what was then called the Randolph-King wing of the civil rights movement, the direct action forces in competition with the court and legislative lobbying approach of the NAACP and Urban League who opposed mass actions.

The Randolph-King forces organized the only three mass demonstrations of the late 1950s, the Prayer Pilgrimage and two Youth Marches for Integrated Schools. These successful popular rallies, whose size ranged from 10,000 to 25,000 people, were the link between Montgomery and the 1960 sit-ins.

The Prayer Pilgrimage launched the SCLC and was King's first platform in the North. His famous speech at the Pilgrimage, "Give Us the Ballot," for the first time projected him as the up-and-coming leader, eclipsing both Randolph and Wilkins.

The Pilgrimage and Youth Marches could later be seen as dress rehearsals for the 1963 March, with identical setups. Randolph and King were the public sponsors, Rustin the organizer, the rank-and-file "Jimmy Higgins" work done primarily by members and allies of the Young Peoples Socialist League (YPSL).

Any problems and kinks in these demonstrations became valuable instructions for the 1963 March.

### Confronting the Democratic Party

It came as a confusing shock when King agreed to Bayard's expulsion from organizing the 1960 Marches. In 1960 Rustin and his allies, now backed up by the newly formed Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), proposed to inject civil rights into the presidential elections through Marches on the Democratic Convention in Los Angeles and the Republican Convention in Chicago, with King and Rustin as co-directors.

The March on conventions demanded that the Party platforms back an end to Jim Crow public accommodations and support Black voter registration in the South, including protection for civil rights workers.

Rep. Adam Clayton Powell asserted that unless the March on the Democratic convention was called off, he would publicly charge Rustin with having a gay affair with Martin Luther King. King capitulated, and Rustin's forced resignation was accepted.

While Rustin was sacrificed, the Marches went ahead (although the movie implies otherwise) and were highly successful. Michael Harrington substituted for Bayard as co-director with King. At King's request, I became youth director for the Chicago March. The Los Angeles March had 5,000 people and Chicago 10,000, double what we had hoped.

Rustin, however, was kept out of civil rights activity for the next three years. He spent those years in antiwar work, much of it abroad. His main contact with the civil rights movement was in helping to mentor and educate SNCC activists, particularly at Howard University, where his protégé Tom Kahn was a SNCC leader. These were years of frustration, pariah status, of irrelevancy.

Rustin's road back to leadership came through his conceiving of the March on Washington in conversations with Randolph. Their original idea was for a Centennial March to celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Randolph and Rustin believed that the tragic betrayal of Reconstruction was its failure to provide economic independence for the freed slaves.

Randolph convinced Bayard to organize an Emancipation March to demand the unfilled economic promises of Reconstruction. As Rustin wrote in the draft proposal for the March on Washington there had been "no fundamental government action to terminate the economic subordination of the American Negro...Integration...will be of limited extent and duration as long as fundamental economic inequality along racial lines persist."

To solve that core problem, the Black struggle against racism, he wrote, should be the catalyst which mobilizes all workers for a program of economic justice. Randolph and Rustin aimed to create a labor and civil rights

alliance, concretized as the March for Jobs and Freedom.

The March succeeded in assembling 250,000 people, primarily through the Black churches, NAACP branches, and the labor movement. It was one-quarter white, and was successful in mobilizing trade union support through Randolph's organization, the Negro American Labor Council, and through liberal unions with large Black membership like District 65, 1199, the UAW and others.

George Meany and the AFL-CIO, however, refused to endorse it.

Rustin's genius in organizing the March is the heart of the movie. His planning brilliance came from his political sophistication, strategic talent and vision, and from never losing track of the larger objectives.

His attention to every detail was legendary, as the movie depicts. His energy, enthusiasm and charisma were contagious. His sparkling oratory and unbelievable capacity for work inspired his staff of young recruits to devotion, commitment, self-sacrifice and incredible workloads. He encouraged them by example to give everything for the movement and its goals.

### Some Still-Hidden History

In restoring the work of Rustin and in portraying the openly gay side of his life, *Rustin* breaks with traditions that have hidden both the existence of gays and their contributions from our history. Yet the film repeats those same traditions in writing out the work, ideas and contributions of socialists.

The movie never mentions that Rustin and his closest collaborators were socialists, and they influenced the movement with socialist ideas. Rustin was for many years the public spokesman and organizer of the A. J. Muste tendency of pacifist, Third Camp Socialists, radical opponents of capitalism and Stalinist class societies, and the imperialism of both Washington and Moscow.

In the 1950s the Muste group and Rustin had close working relations with the Shachtmanite (then the Independent Socialist League) tendency, particularly its activist youth group. The core of Rustin's staff came from the YPSL. Tom (Kahn), Rachelle (Horowitz), Eleanor (Holmes) and Norman (Hill), named in the film, as well as other young socialists, were a part of the Rustin operation for years; all had worked on the Youth Marches.

New recruits from SNCC and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) were also members or allies of the YPSL. One of Bayard's strengths was that his devoted staff were talented, politically sophisticated leaders, who had been educated as cadres in the socialist movement. They did the grunt work — getting the endorsements, mobilizing people, organizing the car pools and buses — making all of Bayard's details a reality.

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# REVIEW

## Torture and the Law By Matthew Clark

### The War in Court:

Inside the Long Fight Against Torture  
By Lisa Hajjar  
University of California Press, 2022, 376 pages.  
\$29.95 hardcover.

THE RIGHT TO protection against torture and to challenge imprisonment by the government are fundamental human rights. Professor Lisa Hajjar tells how the U.S. government assaulted those rights in its “war on terror” by detaining and torturing “terror suspects” without any due process or safeguards.

Many did not survive the ordeal. Some are still in detention without trial. A sociologist with a career of expertise on state torture, who has gone to Guantanamo Bay to meet with detainees and their lawyers, Hajjar is well qualified to tell this story of horrific government abuse and those who oppose it.

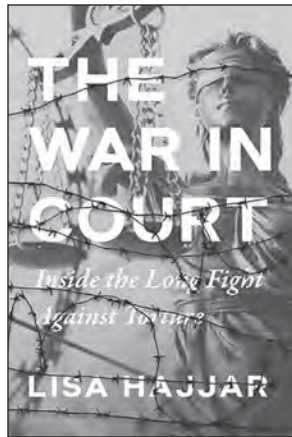
On September 18, 2001, the U.S. Congress enacted the “Authorization for Use of Military Force” which gave extremely broad authority to pursue al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and broadly construed “associated forces.” In November 2001, the Bush administration issued a military order claiming the right to indefinitely detain any non-citizen accused of terrorism, and providing for military trials of detainees without due process.

In February 2002, the administration issued an executive order declaring that it could designate detainees as “enemy combatants,” a slippery category intended to fall outside the legal protections required for prisoners of war or civilians. The U.S. military and CIA began capturing and torturing “enemy combatants” from all over the world, even places far from any battlefield, like Thailand, West Africa and Macedonia.

Those who oppose U.S. global machinations often presume that the masters of war know what they are doing. In their post-9/11 bloodlust, Dick Cheney and others in the Bush administration appear to have created the torture program under the lazy, ill-informed idea that they must do “whatever it takes” to wage the “war on terror.”

If the government’s goal was to use torture to obtain reliable intelligence, military experts debunk these methods as completely ineffective. The Bush-appointed top Navy lawyer Alberto Mora, for example, opposed the policy as both monstrous and a danger to

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national security.

The top administration lawyers for the Army, Marines and Air Force opposed the torture policy and their associated sham methods of adjudication. General Antonio Taguba, author of a U.S. Army report into torture policies in Abu Ghraib

(Iraq), accused the Bush administration of war crimes.

The “ticking time bomb” scenario portrayed in American popular culture, by which the United States must torture terrorists to obtain vital intelligence and stop imminent terrorism, is a fiction. To the contrary, torture produces extremely unreliable intelligence, because victims will say whatever the torturer wants to hear to stop the abuse.

Such was the case with Ibn Sheikh al-Libi, a Libyan captured by the CIA in Pakistan who, under torture, produced bogus “intelligence” of a supposed al-Qaeda/ Saddam Hussein connection, that the US used as justification to invade Iraq. (70-72) The CIA knew this intelligence was flimsy, and al-Libi later recanted the claims.

### Manufacturing Consent for Torture

Whether the U.S. government, media and ruling class ever believed in the effectiveness of its torture program, they successfully utilized torture as red meat to feed the worst impulses in the populace. Hajjar notes recent Pew research polling data showing large swaths of the population support torture of suspected terrorists, even if it produces no positive security outcome.

Hajjar recounts how this pro-torture constituency was not organic, but fostered by those in power. It is not hyperbole to note the collusion between the government and Hollywood in in this regard.

Hajjar notes how the CIA — which refused to give Guantanamo detainee Ammar al-Baluchi’s lawyers “top secret” information about his torture that was necessary for them to challenge his detention — freely shared those details with the filmmakers of the pro-torture blockbuster “Zero Dark Thirty,” so they could open their movie with

a scene portraying his torture.

It is no mystery why the government wants to withhold the unbelievably cruel details of al-Baluchi’s torture. They admittedly obtained no useful intelligence from his torture. Rather, CIA interrogators tortured al-Baluchi as a “training prop,” where trainees would spend hours at a time slamming the naked man headfirst into a wall as practice for interrogations of other detainees.

Years of torture have given al-Baluchi severe and permanent brain damage. (295-299) He remains at Guantanamo Bay without trial for the crimes alleged against him.

Cutting through the propaganda, Hajjar exposes the monstrosity of the torture and detention programs. Murat Kurnaz, a Turkish citizen and German legal resident, was an innocent civilian traveling in Pakistan, detained, and sold for a bounty to U.S. forces looking for “terrorists” in 2001. (99-103)

The United States tortured him, although interrogators quickly learned he had no intelligence or terrorist connections. Rather than release him, the military held him in Guantanamo Bay, where he suffered years of more needless detention and torture. Kurnaz had no idea of the accusations against him until 2004, when he learned that the United States believed one of his Turkish friends in Germany had been a suicide bomber.

Stunned at these accusations, Kurnaz explained that his friend was not a suicide bomber, but was still living in Germany.

Kurnaz’s lawyer even submitted a notarized affidavit from his friend stating as such. The mere fact that this friend was alive to sign an affidavit shows he had not committed a suicide bombing, but this evidence was ignored and Kurnaz was not released until 2007, completely innocent.

### Black Hole of Cruelty

Hajjar’s account is filled with similar horror stories of those trapped in this black hole of authoritarianism and cruelty. The U.S. captors of Jamil el-Banna, released in 2007 after years of detention, redacted the letters from his family, removing his child’s message that “I love you, daddy.” (98-99)

The CIA’s own analysis in 2002 concluded that the majority of Guantanamo detainees had no ties to or useful intelligence on the Taliban or al-Qaeda. A 2006 Seton Hall study found that the majority of detainees committed no hostile acts against the United States. But the system continued, and still remains.

The detainees’ testimony obtained under

brutal torture is rightly tainted as inadmissible, unreliable evidence. The United States therefore sabotaged its own ability to legitimately prosecute cases against suspects, even those who might have had actual al-Qaeda connections.

Over two dozen suspects remain detained in Guantanamo Bay. Many have legal proceedings mired in pretrial limbo. Many still, after all these years, have never been formally charged with a crime.

Hajjar explains how self-proclaimed democracies like the USA, unlike more transparently authoritarian governments, must make particular use of the law to legitimize, rationalize and obscure the barbarity of its torture, so that society might turn off its conscience under the imprimatur of legality.

Because the law is such a vital forum for this struggle, the heroes of Hajjar's story are primarily lawyers fighting to hold the government accountable.

Hajjar describes the impressively varied cross-section of lawyers who worked together in resistance. Leftwing lawyer Michael Ratner's Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) took an early leading role, not the easiest position in the post-9/11 backlash against those accused of "defending terrorists."

CCR found stalwart unlikely allies among US military lawyers, as previously noted. One Judge Advocate General (JAG) lawyer, Lt. Commander Matthew Diaz, even leaked a list of Guantanamo detainees to CCR, for which he was sentenced to six months in prison.

The military JAG Corps is not known for its strident resistance to militarism. Lt. Col. Jon Jackson, a very conservative lawyer who re-enlisted in the military after 9/11 to "fight terrorism," ended up fighting the United States' own actions as defense counsel for terrorist suspect Omar Khadr, the first person since World War II prosecuted in a U.S. military commission for crimes alleged to be committed while he was a minor.

Between the extremes of CCR and the JAG Corps, a wide section of lawyers joined the fight. At its peak, the "Guantanamo Bar" had roughly 500 attorneys.

"Some saw their roles as defenders of the rule of law and due process norms that are the pillars of American legal traditions, while others saw their roles in more global terms as defenders of human rights. What these lawyers had in common was a willingness to act in the name of the laws that were upended by the torture policy." (xviii)

### Some Victories and Reversals

This coalition of lawyers won significant victories and freed many people. In 2004, CCR won *Rasul v Bush*, where the U.S. Supreme Court held that Guantanamo prisoners have the right to file *habeas* petitions demanding that the government justify their imprisonment.

In response to *Rasul*, the United States

created "Combatant Status Review Tribunals" (CSRTs), a kangaroo-court process by which detainees could attempt to challenge their designation as "enemy combatants."

The government could use anonymous witnesses and bypass the standard judicial rules of evidence. Detainees were not entitled to counsel, and anything a detainee told his non-attorney representative was not subject to attorney-client privilege.

Once the CSRT process affirmed detainees' "enemy combatant" designation, they could challenge the detention through a military commission, a similarly slanted kangaroo-court process, although they could at least be represented by counsel.

In 2006, the Supreme Court in *Hamdan v Rumsfeld* ruled military commissions unlawful under the Geneva Conventions and the U.S. Code of Military Justice. In response, the government enacted the Military Commissions Act, reimposing the military commissions and CSRTs in very similar form, and granting criminal immunity to officials involved in torture and detention.

In 2008, the Supreme Court in *Boumediene v Bush* ruled CSRTs unconstitutional, and expanded the *Rasul* ruling that Guantanamo detainees could file *habeas* petitions challenging their detention, because the US exercised exclusive control over the prison.

In 2009, President Obama, who had campaigned on closing Guantanamo Bay, signed a new Military Commissions Act that maintained the military commissions process with only slight modifications.

In the wake of *Boumediene*, detainees began successfully challenging their unlawful detentions. The Obama administration, continuing Bush's obstructionism, appealed each of these district court determinations to the more reactionary circuit court, which overturned them.

Despite the vital work of lawyers challenging abuses, and several important legal victories, the U.S. legal system proved a

largely inadequate safeguard against torture and unjust imprisonment. The Bush administration architects of these monstrous actions have escaped accountability.

U.S. courts have dismissed civil lawsuits by detainees. Maher Arar, a Canadian and Syrian citizen, was abducted by force at JFK International Airport on a layover flight back home to Canada in 2002. The United States falsely believed he had connections to terrorism, and sent him to Syria, where he was brutally tortured for nearly a year before the Syrian government acknowledged he had no terrorist connections.

After he was finally released, Arar and CCR sued the United States. The court dismissed the case, accepting the government's claim that allowing the case to continue would force it to reveal "state secrets." The dismissal was upheld on appeal, and the Supreme Court declined to hear the case. (The Canadian government ultimately paid compensation to Arar for its complicity in his abduction and torture.)

The United States refused even to apologize or acknowledge Arar's torture. The judiciary similarly deferred to the "state secrets privilege" in the case of Khalid el-Masri, an innocent German and Lebanese citizen who happened to have the same name as a suspected terrorist.

El-Masri was abducted in Macedonia and turned over to the CIA, which tortured him at a black site for months before realizing they had the wrong suspect and finally releasing him.

*The War in Court* brings the dark story of U.S. torture in the "war on terror" to light, the utter bankruptcy of the endeavor from its origin, and the heroism of those who resisted. Hajjar hopes that, "someday, the collaborative efforts that have constituted the long fight against torture will help produce a real, national reckoning. [...] That kind of reckoning might, finally, eradicate the specter." (317) ■

## Rustin — continued from page 40

They agreed with Bayard politically, so collaboration led to merger, with Bayard becoming the leading spokesman of the Shachtmanite current in the civil rights movement. None of this history is ever mentioned in the movie.

### Moving Right

By the time of the 1963 March, Rustin and many Shachtmanites were tragically being drawn into Democratic Party politics. The year after the March, they and Bayard accepted the Democratic Party "compromise" that sold out the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 convention. Justification followed in Rustin's famous article embracing coalition politics "From Protest to Politics."

Worse, Democratic Party politics were to lead Rustin and the Shachtmanites into coalition with the Johnson Administration during the Vietnam War. They went from being a left wing of the civil rights movement to its right wing, and Bayard eventually became the chairman of the right wing Social Democrats USA.

Those of us who had been part of the Rustin civil rights operation, and who continued the revolutionary socialist politics we had once shared with Rustin and the Shachtmanites, had to start over again as a small group in 1964, as the Independent Socialist Club, later called the International Socialists. But that is all beyond where this biographical movie ends. ■

# REVIEW

## Fire Alarm — It's Up to Us By Michael McCallister

*"To live with hope in a world that seems determined to race off a cliff: this is the real radical choice."*

—Renato Redentor Constantino

### Future on Fire:

Capitalism and the Politics of Climate Change

By David Camfield

Fernwood Publishing/PM Press, 2023, 128 pages, \$15.95, paperback

### Not Too Late:

Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility

Edited by Rebecca Solnit &

Thelma Young Lutunatabua

Haymarket Books, 2023, 220 pages, \$16.95 paperback, [www.nottoolateclimate.com](http://www.nottoolateclimate.com).

NEWS COMING FROM the annual global climate summit (the Conference of Parties, or COP28) in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, has been minimal and depressing.

The conference, led by the president of the United Arab Emirates' state-run oil company, kicked off with his comment that there was no scientific evidence that fossil fuels were the source of the climate crisis, and if we banned them, humanity would have to "return to dwelling in caves."

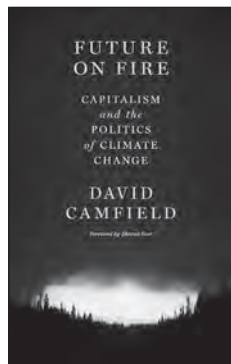
The best news was that a "Loss and Damage" fund was formally created. This fund is intended to force the imperialist countries of the Global North, who have contributed the bulk of other greenhouse gases into earth's atmosphere, pay the underdeveloped countries of the Global South to repair the worst effects of the climate crisis (sea level rise, floods, more intense hurricanes, typhoons and cyclones, and deadly air pollution).

While trillions of dollars will be required to repair the loss and damage to these countries, the largest imperialist power, the United States, pledged just \$17 million.

Since humanity cannot negotiate with the laws of physics, we face an ever-worsening climate crisis for as long as we continue to put carbon into the atmosphere, mostly by burning coal, oil and gas, and releasing methane and other fossil fuels.

The stark reality: If we cannot keep global temperatures from rising 1.5 degrees Celsius over pre-industrial times, the effects on life on earth will be catastrophic.

*Mike McCallister grew up in Milwaukee, receiving a BA in history from UW-Milwaukee. He is a member of the National Writers Union and Solidarity.*



What can we do? Two valuable books approach this question from different angles. In *Future on Fire: Capitalism and the Politics of Climate Change*, David Camfield looks at the strategic level of combating climate change.

The contributors to *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility* provide a variety of answers to the often-asked question "What can I do — at this late date — to fight the climate crisis?"

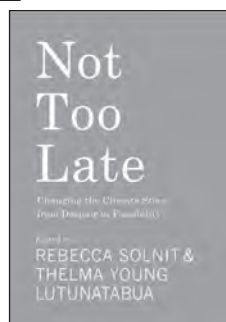
University of Manitoba sociologist Camfield outlines the task in front of us, and explores why we can't depend on capitalism (or individual capitalists), or lobbying the government to organize the transition from fossil fuels. He then argues effectively that only mass movements can really organize the kinds of massive change required to reverse course.

### Relying on Liberal Politicians

Corporate media outlets often point to technological solutions like carbon capture and electric vehicles as the way forward to a climate-friendly future.

Others note that solar and wind power generation is already cheaper than digging up the last fossil-fuel deposits, hopefully leading the invisible hand of the market, along with "socially responsible investors," to (eventually) do the right thing.

"To be sure, some [capitalists] will find ways to make considerable profits by investing in renewable energy generation or producing other goods and services that could be useful for addressing the climate crisis," Camfield writes, "But a rapid, all-embracing transition away from GHG [greenhouse gas] pollution of the kind required to limit climate change to dangerous rather than extremely dangerous levels would not boost the profits of most firms."



As we march into the 2024 election season, U.S. activists are again preparing to join Joe Biden's re-election campaign, touting the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) as the "strongest government action ever taken" against global heating. To be sure, it has few competitors.

The Biden Administration continues to grant offshore oil drilling licenses, and the Mountain Valley gas pipeline was approved to get Joe Manchin's vote for the IRA in the Senate.

Camfield notes that Barack Obama, Biden's Democratic predecessor in the White House (where Biden served as vice president) "also presided over an unprecedented expansion of oil and gas extraction by fracking."

"The appalling experience of Donald Trump's presidency should not obscure Obama's actual record in office."

*"The policies of Joe Biden's administration will not be identical to those of Obama on climate change and many other issues. ...but there is no reason to think its policies will be better from the perspective of climate justice and social justice more broadly."*

Camfield also reviews the climate record of Canadian Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and former French President (and Socialist Party leader) Francois Hollande, who both said all the right things about the fight against the climate crisis, but still stood up for fossil fuel interests when required.

### Mass Movements — Our Best Hope

Canada's labor party, the New Democratic Party, fares no better in Camfield's assessment. "The NDP government of the province of Alberta from 2015 to 2019 actively pushed for pipeline construction to export more tar sands oil (while the NDP government in British Columbia) supported a massive liquefied natural gas project in the province."

"Whether 'enlightened' parties of business or social liberals, the record of the parties of the extreme center (including European Green Parties) shows that they will not bring about anything resembling just transition," Camfield writes.

*"Why do these parties continue to govern in ways that have led us to a much hotter planet? It's because for them a challenge to fossil capital is inconceivable and because they support the capitalist status quo. The actions required to carry through a just transition are incompatible with its rules, to which these parties' leaders are loyal."*

The central thesis of *Future on Fire* is the

necessity of mass movements to change social relations and bring more power to working people and the oppressed. This is the only way to change the world.

Camfield defines mass movements as “people acting together. It’s all about collective action, not just individual choices. In a movement, what people do goes beyond the official channels of politics, such as voting in elections, and is usually disruptive. Acting together involves organizing. ... For a social movement to develop, the collective action has to be sustained.”

These sustained mass movements include the Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd’s murder in 2020, the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements of the 1950s and ’60s, and the mobilization of indigenous people against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) that attracted thousands of people from around the United States to the South Dakota encampment.

He identifies several features that allow a mobilization around an issue become a mass social movement:

- An orientation to drawing in larger numbers of people, beyond the folks already mobilized,
- Leaders encouraging people to get involved in groups that keep organizing between big demonstrations, and
- Smartly using disruptive mass action, such as strikes, occupations and blockades.

### Next Steps for the Reader

When someone becomes convinced that some action is required to change society, the first question is “What can I do?”

While Camfield is clear on the primary strategy to defeat climate change, he’s less so in answering this specific question for his readers. Obviously, participating in demonstrations is often the first step, but how do you get connected enough to find the next demonstration?

A collection of essays designed to inspire new and would-be activists, *Not Too Late: Changing the Climate Story from Despair to Possibility* can serve as at least a partial complement to *World on Fire*.

U.S. feminist writer Rebecca Solnit and Thelma Young Lutunatabua, a climate activist from Fiji, assembled 25 essays and interviews from 21 activists, scientists, government officials and academics for this easy-to-read collection.

Solnit writes “A lot of stories in circulation endeavor to strip you of hope and power, to tell you it doesn’t matter, or it’s too late or there’s nothing you can do or we never win. *Not Too Late* is a project to try to return hope and power through both facts and perspectives.”

Many chapters are indeed an antidote to the frustration, burnout and even despair (a term that comes up often as an opposite

to hope in the essays) from which veteran climate activists can suffer, in view of the increasingly dire effects of the crisis we witness across the globe.

Mary Annise Heglar, a terrific journalist on the climate beat, kicks off the collection with perhaps the best advice of all for new activists in her chapter “This is Where You Come In.”

*“What can I do? There’s no such thing. I wish there were. ... We have to accept that we’re all going to have to buckle down for the long haul. Responding to this crisis is going to have to become part of who we are. All the time. Once you understand that, you understand that this isn’t about climate action at all. It’s about climate commitment. Climate action is recycling or voting or opting for a vegan meal. Climate commitment includes those singular actions, but is bigger still. It’s a framework. It’s asking yourself: What can I do next? And always next.”*

*“Now that you understand that the question is complicated, the answer actually emerges as quite simple: do what you’re good at. And do your best.”*

Antonia Juhasz reminds us that there’s a reason the fossil-fuel industry is increasingly desperate in recent years, to the point of sending hundreds of lobbyists to COP28.

Juhasz, in an interview with the editors, notes that they’ve “been suffering death by a thousand cuts for years. Until very recently, corporate profits, market values, investor returns, and demand growth (that is, people buying their products) had been in a steady nosedive.”

Leah Cardimore Stokes, who teaches environmental politics, offers a three-point program to resolve 75% of the energy

problem:

- Transition to renewable energy
- Electrify transportation
- Electrify buildings and industry

These are some highlights of *Not Too Late*. While this is not a traditional book of inspiration, nearly everyone will find something to give them courage to fight for a livable future on this planet.

### What Does Success Look like?

Ultimately, Camfield concludes that a mass social movement for a just transition from fossil fuels can only succeed by breaking with capitalism, transitioning to “a self-governing society with a nondestructive relationship to the rest of nature — ecosocialism.”

ATC readers will find Camfield’s conclusions familiar, and the reminder that ultimately, it all comes down to taking political power away from capitalists and putting the working class in charge.

*Future on Fire* offers an excellent introduction to ecosocialist ideas for those already active in the climate fight.

Unfortunately, many contributors to *Not Too Late* really want you to believe that revolutionary changes won’t be required.

Mary Ann Hitt’s “A Love Letter from the Clean Energy Future” of 2030 goes the furthest in that direction. She suggests that Joe Biden’s climate plan, along with enlightened state and federal government regulations, might really do the trick. Yes, there are movements, and activists, and a lot of hard work, but Hitt believes rational politicians will indeed save us all.

The ecosocialist movement offers a better hope for our future. ■



SCIENTISTS HAVE UNMASKED the lies of the “merchants of doubt” and defused the schemes to try to discredit their conclusions. Social pressure has continued to grow with increasingly frequent and violent disasters. It also gained traction within the ruling class, particularly among insurers.

All this has translated at the level of the main governments into a desire to begin something like an “energy transition.” In this context, the old tactic of backward obstruction becomes difficult to maintain.

Energy groups like to present themselves as benefactors who offer humanity heat, light, mobility and development. Continuing to ignore climate issues could seriously damage their brand image. Populations convinced of the fact that these capitalists, with full knowledge of the facts, deliberately sacrificed their living conditions on the altar of profit could demand compensation for the damage, cry for revenge, or even demand the socialization of the energy sector with expropriation of the capitalists.

—Daniel Tanuro, from “Fossil Takeover of the COPs,” from *International Viewpoint* website

of millions of people the real-life economy doesn't feel that way. That hurts the electoral prospects for an incumbent administration, i.e. for Biden in 2024 as it did for Trump in 2020.

### **Further Irony: Demographics**

If there's one factor that should be pushing the Republican Party toward permanent marginality even as it hurtles toward extreme-right lunacy, it's that the United States is demographically becoming no longer a "white" country, and that younger generations are each more diverse than the previous one.

It's precisely young, African American and other non-white and immigrant communities, and the LGBT and non-binary population, who are the front-line targets of white-supremacist, Christian-nationalist and religious-right ideologies that thoroughly dominate today's Republican Party — including of course the Trump cult but not only that sector.

Yet it's precisely those younger, less white and less affluent sectors where the Democrats' presumptively overwhelming majorities are narrowing. Polls are showing nearly a quarter of African Americans preferring Trump over Biden, an astonishing (even if it turns out to be short-lived) index of disillusionment.

*What's happened?* Mainly, we think it's that the Democrats have overpromised and under-delivered real change — in terms of racial justice, student debt relief, immigration reform, tackling climate change, and more. Partly too, it was only a matter of time until the feeling of relief from the (first) Trump nightmare wore off.

To some extent, also, Biden's age and immovability present a bad look. But on key issues that are really hurting the Democrats' prospects in 2024, it's not Biden that's senile, but *American policy*.

This is particularly illustrated in the present Israeli genocidal war on Gaza. The crucial young sector of the Democrats' voter base is increasingly sympathetic to Palestine, alienated from the party's traditional unquestioning support of Israel, and no longer duped by feeble bleats about a long-dead "two-state solution." The December 1 resumption of the full-scale Israeli offensive, along with escalating murderous military and settler violence, accelerates that deepening and absolutely necessary disgust with Washington's active complicity in the massacre.

As for the Arab American and Palestinian communities, the fury over "Genocide Joe" Biden is difficult to describe if you haven't witnessed it. Leaders in communities like Dearborn, Michigan, a key to the Democratic success in 2020, are openly vowing "we will never vote for Biden again even if the alternative is worse." It's impossible to say right now how this feeling will translate into votes or non-votes next November — keeping in mind the maxim that "all politics are local" — but the Democrats are willfully blind if they underestimate its importance.

Another factor that will require close further attention is the flood of bipartisan money from AIPAC (American Israel Public Affairs Committee) and rightwing sources to defeat progressive, pro-Palestinian congressional representatives like Rashida Tlaib (MI), Cori Bush (MO) and Ilhan Omar (MN) in their primaries. AIPAC has been promising to throw \$20 million toward any candidate who'll challenge Tlaib. Any

Democratic leadership connivance in these efforts could have fatal electoral consequences.

### **Immigration Crisis**

Another issue bedeviling the Biden administration, clearly, is the immigration and asylum crisis. This is a powerful case of imperialism creating a problem it can't solve. The numbers of desperate refugees and asylum applicants seeking entry at the southern border are overwhelming U.S. and northern Mexican cities, towns and support networks attempting to shelter and feed them.

The refugee crisis is a thoroughly bipartisan product of decades of destructive policies that we've discussed in these pages: decades of "free trade" that's wiped out much of family farming in Mexico, genocidal counterrevolutionary wars in Central America, economic sanctions that greatly contribute to the unraveling of Venezuela as well as Cuba, serial catastrophic interventions in Haiti, and more.

Worst of all, 50 years of an insane U.S. "war on drugs" could not have been more brilliantly designed to turn the drug trade over to violent criminal cartels while shattering lives and communities in North America. On top of all this, the escalating effects of climate change are wiping out means of subsistence such as, for example, coffee crops in Honduras. We've noted before that desperate immigration journeys and calamities are global in scope, as the miseries in the Mediterranean and cruelties of the Italian, British and other European governments illustrate.

This crisis eats away at domestic confidence in the Biden administration's grip on policy, even though it's not of their making — and even though the "alternative" is the outright sadism of the Republicans.

A freshly passed Texas law enables local police to arrest suspected "illegals" on any or no pretext, and local courts to initiate detentions and deportations. In usurping clear federal jurisdiction over immigration, this law is so blatantly unconstitutional in its application, and so fascistic in its implications, that only the prevailing White Supremacy Court of the United States (WSCOTUS) majority would seem likely to uphold it. (The ACLU is mounting court challenges before the law takes effect in February.)

There remains one area where the right wing and the Republican Party seem determined to self-destruct: their drive to complete the banning and criminalizing of abortion in the United States. In one state after another, where the right to abortion comes to a choice by voters, it wins — decisively. The horrific implications of a Republican sweep of the White House and Congress will keep not only women but a big slice of the entire electorate on side with the Democrats. The Republican determination to continue a losing anti-abortion crusade is rooted in the centrality of that issue to the overall "culture war" assault on gender, racial and social literacy — in libraries, schools, college campuses, and everywhere else.

That specter might, just barely, preserve the Democrats' grip on power after a looming 2024 election choice that hardly anyone outside the Trump cult actually wants. That's a pretty weak reed to grasp, and certainly nothing for a progressive left to bank on. The struggle for an alternative must look elsewhere, beginning with the rising activism we've seen for labor, for Palestine, for immigration and reproductive justice! ■

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